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# Allegiances

**SHADOWCLAN**

**Leader**

Darkstar — dark grey tom with yellow eyes

**Deputy**

Bonerun — white tom with black paws and blue eyes

**Medicine Cat**

Mintbreeze — tortoiseshell tom with green eyes
Seedpaw — tan fluffy tom with amber eyes (Blackrose & Oakcloud)

**Warriors**

Oakcloud — brown tabby tom with white chest and paws and green eyes
Lightfeather — light yellow tabby tom with green eyes
Ashthorn — dark grey she-cat with scarred muzzle and amber eyes
Brokenmask — black-and-white tuxedo tom with blue eyes
Toadpounce — small dark brown tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes
Tigerflare — dark tortoiseshell tom with amber eyes
Crystalfall — fluffy white she-cat with copper eyes
Ravenfur — silky black she-cat with yellow eyes
Nightrush — black tom with green eyes
Cinderstep — light grey she-cat with black paws and green eyes
Duskpelt — dark smoky she-cat with silver dapples and pale green eyes
Flowerdew — cream-and-white striped she-cat with light blue eyes
Vineclaw — lean brown tom with ivy-like tabby streaks and yellow eyes
Driftswipe — blue-grey she-cat with white muzzle and green eyes
Moongaze — pale silver tom with amber eyes

**Apprentices**

Pinepaw — dark brown tom with light stripes and grey eyes (Blackrose & Oakcloud)

**Kits**

Fogkit — pale tortoiseshell she-cat with a dark grey and cream face and soft green eyes (Driftswipe & Bonerun)
Snowkit — silver-grey tom with blue eyes (Driftswipe & Bonerun)
Nettlekit — fluffy tortoiseshell she-cat with copper eyes (Crystalfall & Tigerflare)

**Elders**

Briarscratch — skinny light brown tabby she-cat
Barkfall — skinny grey tom with patchy fur

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**RIVERCLAN**

**Leader**

Dawnstar — large golden she-cat with amber eyes

**Deputy**

**Minnowleap** — black-and-grey tabby tom with light blue eyes

**Medicine Cat**

Goldenleaf — white she-cat with ginger patches and green eyes

**Warriors**

Eaglestrike — brown tabby she-cat with white muzzle and copper eyes
Sandflame — fluffy cream she-cat with ginger tail and light green eyes
Bluestream — light grey tom with one white paw and dark blue eyes

Troutshine — speckled brown she-cat with deep copper eyes
Swanflight — white she-cat with black speckles and blue eyes
Minkfoot — small dark brown tom with white and grey splotches
Rippletide — pale silver tom with icy blue eyes
Batwing — small black tom with white-tipped ears and tail and yellow eyes
Reedshade — tall brown she-cat with darker stripes and green eyes
Shellcrest — white tom with sandy patches and amber eyes
Dapplesplash — dappled brown and white she-cat with blue eyes
Rushheart — fluffy tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes
Pikeflip — dark brown spotted tabby tom with yellow eyes
Brookfrost — dark grey she-cat with white flecks and green eyes

**Apprentices**

Freezingpaw — white tom with blue eyes (Sandflame & Shellcrest)
Gingerpaw — fluffy ginger she-cat with copper eyes (Sandflame & Shellcrest)

**Kits**

Ivykit — dark green-eyed brown tabby she-cat (Troutshine & Minkfoot)
Baykit — soft brown tom with light amber eyes (Troutshine & Minkfoot)

**Elders**

Dryriver — pale tan tom with dark green eyes
Flowerwilt — skinny tortoiseshell she-cat with deep blue eyes
Otterwhisker — dark brown tom with pale muzzle and cloudy blue eyes

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**THUNDERCLAN**

**Leader**

Fernstar — large black tom with light green eyes

**Deputy**

Sunheart — golden tom with white chest and paws and amber eyes

**Medicine Cat**

Lilypool — light brown dappled she-cat with light blue eyes
Mothpaw — pale brown tabby tom with green eyes (Birchsky & Hailflood)

**Warriors**

Raventail — white she-cat with black tail
Blazestrike — dark ginger tom with golden stripes
Hollywing — calico she-cat with green eyes
Greywillow — dark grey tom with white paws
Silverwhisker — silky silver she-cat with green eyes
Brackenstorm — thick-furred brown tabby tom with darker legs and amber eyes
Clovermist — soft grey-and-white she-cat with pale green eyes
Birchsky — pale brown tabby tom with white underbelly and dark green eyes
Rowanblaze — deep reddish she-cat with bright amber eyes
Flintclaw — black smoky tom with yellow eyes
Willowstep — slender grey she-cat with long legs and soft blue eyes
Rocktooth — brown tabby tom with blue eyes
Hailflood — white she-cat with grey flecks
Mapleflare — rich red she-cat with amber eyes
Stonepelt — broad grey tom with dark paws and green eyes

**Apprentices**

Ashpaw — dark grey spotted tom with green eyes (Silverwhisker & Rocktooth)
Wrenpaw — small brown she-cat with white chest and hazel eyes (Silverwhisker & Rocktooth)
Dovepaw — pale grey she-cat with blue eyes (Silverwhisker & Rocktooth)

**Kits**

Squirrelkit — reddish-brown she-cat with fluffy tail (Sunheart & Mapleflare)

Dandelionkit — pale golden tom with soft fur (Sunheart & Mapleflare)
Rosekit — white she-cat with pink nose (Raventail & Greywillow)
Cloudkit — white tom with grey ears and tail (Raventail & Greywillow)

**Elders**

Silentfeather — grey-and-white deaf she-cat with blue eyes
Dustfur — light brown tom with faded stripes
Brightleaf — golden she-cat with cloudy green eyes

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**WINDCLAN**

**Leader**

Redstar — ginger tom with hazel eyes

**Deputy**

Swiftclaw — light brown she-cat with white paws

**Medicine Cat**

Pebbleshine — brown tabby tom with dark green eyes

**Warriors**

Skyrunner — tiny grey she-cat with black paws and hazel eyes
Frozenfire — grey she-cat with dark amber eyes
Whiteflower — white she-cat with golden splotches
Breezetail — pale tan she-cat with long tail and amber eyes
Stormwhisk — dark grey tom with sharp features and blue eyes
Larkflight — light brown she-cat with soft spotted pelt
Meadowrun — soft brown she-cat with lighter speckles and warm green eyes
Kestrelcry — mottled brown-and-white tom with piercing yellow eyes
Fuzzycloud — fluffy grey tom with pale eyes
Thornfang — black-and-white splotched she-cat

Heathersong — hazel she-cat with dark copper eyes
Mudfall — dark brown and black tabby tom
Icehawk — skinny silver tom with grey eyes
Foxcry — slight ginger tom with light amber eyes
Dustwhisper — cream she-cat with white paws and pale amber eyes
Galestride — tall light grey tom with long legs and sharp blue eyes

**Apprentices**

Lilacpaw — pale grey she-cat with blue eyes (Whiteflower & Fuzzycloud)
Rabbitpaw — quick white tom with brown ears and paws (Whiteflower & Fuzzycloud)
Dewpaw — fluffy silver tabby tom with blue eyes (Whiteflower & Fuzzycloud)

**Kits**

Gorsekit — spiky brown tom with dark eyes (Heathersong & Mudfall)
Lightningkit — golden she-cat with white streaks (Heathersong & Mudfall)
Fennelkit — pale green-eyed tom with soft fur (Heathersong & Mudfall)

**Elders**

Hollowsky — long-limbed grey tom with fading eyesight
Softbreeze — thin white she-cat with a gentle voice

# Prologue- New Problems

Branches rustled under a strong gust of wind, casting long shadows over the camp clearing. The silence was broken by a streak of lightning and a pained yowl.

Shadowclan's medicine cat, Mintbreeze, tried to calm Driftswipe with gentle murmurs. "Don't worry, Driftswipe," and "They're nearly here," he continued to say.

Out of all honesty, the kitting wasn't going too well. There was a lot of blood and it was taking a long time, Mintbreeze wasn't sure what would happen. Bonerun, the new Shadowclan deputy, paced anxiously outside of the Nursery. He cringed everytime Driftswipe yowled. The rest of the Shadowclan cats were clustered together in little groups, murmuring about Driftswipe. They felt terrible for Bonerun to have to listen to his mate cry out.

But what they didn't know was that there was a strange cat nearby.

Iceheart quietly watched, patiently waiting for the first kit to be born. This kit could change the fate of the clans if he seized the right moment. The Starclan cat perched next to Driftswipe with his tail twitching to and fro.

Whiskers trembling with excitement, he repeated the prophecy in his head, *find the lost warriors to help fight the lasting darkness...* Great Starclan! It was his second prophecy that he was going to be muttering in a cat's ear, yet it was even more peculiar than the last!

Iceheart was shaken out of his thoughts when the first kit suddenly came with a heave from Driftswipe, and he watched with anticipation as Mintbreeze feverishly licked its fur.

Mintbreeze let out a surprised gasp, "It's a she-kit but..."

Driftswipe frowned and wearily glanced at the kit, her eyes widening with shock, "She looks like her, doesn't she?" she mewed

sadly.

Iceheart flicked his ears at the Shadowclan cats' observation, it was the reason why he was even there in the first place. Knowing he would need to be quick, he shifted forwards a few paw-steps, but just as he was about to make his move, another figure stepped out of the shadows. Iceheart whipped around and fixed an icy stare onto the white she-cat. He bristled and narrowed his eyes before carefully unsheathing his claws and digging them into the sodden ground.

"You shouldn't be here, Glowstar," Iceheart bluntly mewed. He was uncomfortable in his former leader's presence, almost as if he was a misbehaving kit being caught by his mother. *Sharpstar never said I'd have to deal with this,* Iceheart thought, thinking back to when the russet she-cat shooed him off to deliver the prophecy.

Glowstar flicked her tail and cackled, "Oh, Iceheart, I always knew you'd be a traitor to Riverclan."

Suddenly, rage ignited deep in Iceheart's chest and coursed through him, leaving his fur burning despite the cold rain. "It's *nice* not to see you in Starclan!" Iceheart retorted with a snarl.

Anger flashed in Glowstar's eyes, though she ignored him and fixed her gaze on Driftswipe. With a choked cry and another heave, Driftswipe gave birth to another kit.

Glowstar was eyeing the first kit and her lip twitched with disgust. She made a move toward it. Bunching her legs, the former Riverclan leader sprang at the first kit with her claws outstretched.

Iceheart didn't waste a moment as he leapt and met Glowstar in midair. The two clashed to the ground with their claws swiping and tails lashing. Iceheart hissed in pain, his teeth clenched as Glowstar dug her claws into his chest. Iceheart kicked her off, only having a heartbeat to spring to his paws before Glowstar launched herself at him once more. He ducked from her claws to nip at her chest before he twisted onto his forepaws and bucked, landing a kick to her nose. Glowstar hissed in anger and snatched Iceheart's plumy tail between her teeth, yanking backwards. Stumbling, Iceheart buckled

to the ground and managed to roll onto his back before Glowstar leapt on him. Merciless claws battered his face and he feebly raised his paws to defend the blows.

Heartbeats later, Glowstar stood over a motionless Iceheart and triumphantly lashed her tail before turning to Driftswipe who was nuzzling her newborn kits. Iceheart weakly watched as the white she-cat bent down to whisper into the second kit's ear, gently placing a paw over his pelt. After a heartbeat, she took a step back and smirked at Iceheart before vanishing.

Iceheart took a deep breath and heaved himself to his paws. He sighed before stumbling over to Driftswipe and her kits. He placed a trembling paw over the first kit's pelt and quietly murmured the prophecy into her ear, "Young kit, find the lost warriors to help fight the lasting darkness. Do not trust *him*..." Iceheart slowly stepped away and mournfully watched the family before dissolving.

# Chapter 1- A Fresh Start

Fogkit is what you would call an 'early-bloomer.' She opened her eyes early. She didn't know why she did, she just had a good feeling about it.

The first thing she saw when she opened her eyes was her mother, Driftswipe. Driftswipe had looked kind and Fogkit always admired her since then. She would often murmur in Fogkit's ears, telling her how pretty she looked, but Fogkit knew the rest of the clan sometimes whispered about her. Yet, she never let it bother her.

...

A few moons later, Fogkit snored softly into her paws. The day before, the elders had her and her litter-brother clean out the nests. She didn't mind helping, but now she was exhausted. Her tail twitched against the moss, paws flicking as her dreams carried her somewhere far from the nursery.

She stood in a place she didn't recognize.

The air was cool and still, and the ground beneath her paws felt different—firmer, unfamiliar. Shapes moved just out of focus, like shadows slipping between trees. She tried to follow them, but they always stayed just out of reach.

A faint voice brushed past her ears.

Then—

Something bumped into her.

Fogkit jerked awake, her eyes snapping open as she lashed her tail in annoyance. *That was such an interesting dream... and now it was gone.* She frowned, trying to remember where she had been, but the memory was already slipping away like mist.

Blinking, she turned around to see her litter-brother staring right at

her.

"Ah! Snowkit," she squeaked, bristling her tail. "You scared me!"

Snowkit flicked his ears with a devious grin. He snickered, "Aw, I'm *so* sorry."

Fogkit frowned before looking away. *What is up with him?* He was always playing tricks. Always by himself. Always secretive. Great StarClan! She wished she had a sister instead.

A heartbeat later, Driftswipe poked her head inside the nursery and glanced around the quiet den before fixing her eyes on the kits. "Come along, it's time for you two to meet Darkstar."

Fogkit immediately leapt to her paws. "Oh! Is Darkstar excited to meet us, Driftswipe?"

"He sure is," Driftswipe let out a *mrrow* of amusement.

Snowkit groaned, "But I'm hungry! Aren't we going to eat first and have our first piece of *real* fresh-kill like you said? I'm sick of mice, ma!"

Driftswipe released a small sigh, "Yes of course, Snowkit. You can eat first."

Snowkit leapt to his paws at the mention of "eating" and he swiped his tongue over his mouth before scampering towards their mother.

Fogkit followed more slowly, in an attempt to look formal for her first time properly meeting Darkstar. Of course, he came to see the kits when they were born, but they never had the chance to speak to one another since.

The small family emerged from the nursery and made their way to the middle of the Shadowclan camp. Fogkit glanced around, wondering where Darkstar could be, when a silver-furred cat approached them.

Driftswipe waved her tail in greeting to the dark tom. "Hello, Moongaze! You haven't formally met my kits yet. This is Fogkit,"

she beckoned to Fogkit before turning to Snowkit, "And this here—this is Snowkit."

Moongaze nodded. "Nice to meet you, kits," he murmured, looking at the kits wistfully.

"It's nice to meet you too," Fogkit purred kindly, wondering why Moongaze looked so sad.

Snowkit snorted, "He smells like crow-food!"

Fogkit let out a gasp of shock, "Snowkit!"

Moongaze narrowed his eyes. "At least I don't smell like you," he joked as Snowkit bristled, although there was a hint of pain in his voice.

Driftswipe nervously chuckled, "Alright, alright. That's enough talking to Moongaze. Let's run along to see Darkstar." The kits' mother beckoned to the leader's den.

Moongaze sniffed before stalking off towards the medicine cat den, grumbling along the way.

Fogkit turned to look at Snowkit, her jaw dropped. "Snowkit! Do you realize how rude that was?" she exclaimed.

Snowkit shrugged. "Whatever. It's fine," he muttered before following Driftswipe.

Fogkit stared after Moongaze, feeling bad for the tom. With a tail half-drooping, Fogkit followed after Snowkit and Driftswipe more reluctantly. She wanted to speak with Moongaze more... but Darkstar! She flicked her ears and quickly caught up with her family.

Fogkit frowned, glancing up at her mother. "Driftswipe? Why was Moongaze looking at us like that?"

Driftswipe's eyes darkened and she sighed, "Moongaze always wanted kits of his own but never had the chance. Splitstar..." she trailed off, flattening her ears. "It's nothing to worry about."

A dark-furred cat was padding over by then, and Bonerun quickly joined them.

He released a small purr as he sat down. "How are my loves doing?" he asked while twining tails with Driftswipe.

"Good!" Fogkit piped up.

Snowkit shrugged and muttered something inaudible.

Bonerun sighed and frowned at Snowkit, seeming to be perplexed by him. Fogkit watched as he shook his head and turned to the dark grey cat who had settled down in front of them. "Darkstar, this is Fogkit and Snowkit."

Darkstar nodded and smiled softly. "Lovely names for lovely kits."

Driftswipe broke out into a purr, "Thank you!"

Darkstar pondered for a moment, keeping his gaze set on the kits. Fogkit felt a little uncomfortable under the leader's stare. *Was something wrong?*

Darkstar finally looked away from the kits. "Bonerun, Driftswipe, I'd like to speak to you two in my den," he murmured. "I have a few things to tell you."

# Chapter 2- Nettlekit Isn't Telling Me Something

Fogkit crouched low to the ground as she peeked from the undergrowth. Her brother was unaware of her creeping up on him. The two had decided to play a game while they waited for their parents to return from Darkstar's den.

Fogkit's excitement could practically be seen from fox-lengths away as she wiggled her haunches. She suddenly sprang from her hiding spot with tiny, unsheathed claws and landed right on top of Snowkit.

Her litter-brother squealed and flailed as he was bowled over. Fogkit let out a chorus of triumphant squeaks as she tumbled with Snowkit, creating a large cloud of dust to erupt from underneath them.

"Hey!"

The two siblings ignored the yowl as they crashed into a furry thing and continued to latch on to each other, nipping and swiping to their heart's content. There was another grumble behind them but they continued to only pay attention to themselves.

"Hey! Stop that!"

Suddenly, two paws landed on the kits, holding them down, and Fogkit protested in alarm.

She realized the paws belonged to Oakcloud, the senior warrior who glared at the kits for a heartbeat before letting them up.

"You both are making a mess! Just *look* at what you've done!" Oakcloud exclaimed, beckoning his tail to the broken twigs and scattered moss that he seemed to have been using for nests.

Fogkit lowered her gaze. "I'm—we're very sorry, Oakcloud," she murmured before glancing at Snowkit, who didn't look very sorry at all, and she gave him a shove to the shoulder.

"Oh! Yeah. We're sorry," Snowkit grumbled through clenched teeth.

Oakcloud snorted, "If you're sorry then see to the mess you've made. I've better things to do than clean up a kit's mess." He padded away with his nose stuck up in the air.

Fogkit sighed, "Yes, Oakcloud." She turned to the scraps of moss and began gathering them together.

After a few moments of tidying up the mess, Fogkit glanced around to find Snowkit gone. *That little...*

She sniffed and turned back to her work, picking up the moss and discarding it in the nursery nests which looked like they could use new bedding. She finished cleaning and decided there was no use in wasting her time to look for Snowkit and decided to find her parents instead.

Fogkit glanced around, spotting another kit near the camp exit. She recognized the fluffy tortoiseshell instantly as Nettlekit. *Maybe she's seen if Driftswipe and Bonerun left Darkstar's den by now?*

Fogkit scampered up to the other kit."Hi, Nettlekit! Have you seen Driftswipe or Bonerun around?"

Nettlekit tilted her head. "Uh, yeah actually. I think they went outside camp with Darkstar."

Fogkit frowned. Her parents would have surely told her that they were going to leave her and Snowkit for awhile? Apparently not...

Fogkit nodded. "Thanks, Nettlekit! Oh, um. Have you also seen Snowkit?"

"What am I, your look-out buddy?" Nettlekit snorted. "No, I haven't," she muttered, quickly glancing away.

Fogkit flicked her ears, Nettlekit wasn't telling her something.

"Okay. Well, thanks. I guess," Fogkit mewed before turning away.

She scampered towards the elders den, figuring she could listen to a story while she waited for Driftswipe and Bonerun to return. She didn't have much else to do, considering there weren't many other cats in the clan that were her age.

Squeezing through the entrance, she greeted, "Hello!"

"Eh? Who is it?" Barkfall mumbled sleepily, squinting against the light filtering through the den.

The skinny tom with grey fur hanging off in patches huffed as Briarscratch mewed, a little too loudly, in his ear, "Why, it's Fogkit, you old bat! Who else would it be?"

Fogkit was one of the only "youngsters" who visited the elders. Snowkit, of course, would never visit willingly. Nettlekit took after her mother, Crystalfall, and always seemed to have an excuse to everything which left her "too busy" to ever stop by. Pinepaw and Seedpaw visited often to clean the elders from ticks, but they were rather quiet since Blackrose and Coldpaw died.

Fogkit was jerked out of her thoughts as Barkfall mewed, "What can we do for you, Fogkit?"

"Well, I was wondering if you could tell me a story," Fogkit purred.

Briarscratch nodded. "You're becoming an apprentice soon, aren't you? Well, why don't we tell you about Shadowclan's well-known tradition, partnership?"

Fogkit's eyes widened in interest. It was true, she would be becoming an apprentice soon, and one very important part of training would be learning to work with a Partner.

"Yes please!" Fogkit mewed before scooting closer to the older cats. She sat down neatly, curling her plumy tail over her paws.

"Hmmm... where to begin? Ah, yes. Many, many moons ago there were two apprentices. Let me remember... Lightpaw and Darkpaw.

"Now, you see, these two young'uns never got along. Lightpaw was loved by Shadowclan, she was warm and kind, and encouraged every cat to do their best. Darkpaw was feared, he was scary and mean, and tried to prove himself to be better than everyone else. Both were going to become very exceptional warriors, but it was almost as if something was missing from each of them." Briarscratch nodded to Barkfall to continue.

Barkfall cleared his throat. "One day, the two apprentices were battle-training, which usually ended in a draw since they could never beat each other. Anyway, they were without their mentors because they liked to train on their own time.

"Now, while Lightpaw and Darkpaw were practicing, a huge, angry fox snuck up on them!" Barkfall shot a warning glance at Fogkit. "You better not go off by yourself for this very reason."

Fogkit laughed nervously, "No, no, I won't." Her eyes widened with anticipation. "Well, what happened next?"

Barkfall nodded approvingly while Briarscratch rolled her eyes at him and continued in a booming voice, "The fox lunged for Lightpaw! The little she-cat was frozen with fear, and right before the fox was about to get her, Darkpaw hurled himself at the fox's face and clawed at its eyes! Darkpaw couldn't fend off the fox all by himself though, so Lightpaw got up beside him, and the two of them fought the fox until it was mess of fur and blood.

"Darkpaw wanted to kill the fox but Lightpaw told him not to. She said sometimes you have to show something mercy even if it wronged you. That is what Darkpaw was missing: fairness, the will to balance your choices.

"But Darkpaw told her that sometimes you have to make the choice to kill something even if you don't want to. That is what Lightpaw was missing: confidence, the sureness of what to do." Briarscratch finished, closing her eyes in a sense of newfound peace.

Barkfall murmured, "From that day on, Shadowclan warriors were partnered together. It's believed that we're born with half of us missing so that we have to find our counterpart to complete

ourselves. Until we go to Starclan, we are not perfect. Remember that, Fogkit."

Fogkit nodded, pondering over Barkfall's wise words. She blinked gratefully at the two elders.

"Thank you."

Briarscratch purred, "You're welcome, Fogkit. Go run along, I'm sure Driftswipe is wondering where you are."

Fogkit flicked her ears in acknowledgment and turned to leave, but she didn't reach more than a few paw-steps beyond the den before angry caterwauls broke the peaceful silence.

Brokenmask pounded into camp with a horrified look on his face. "Riverclan has Snowkit!"

# Chapter 3- Rapidstar's Lookalike

Fogkit looked around with fear as her clanmates yowled in anger, their tails lashing. *How could RiverClan have Snowkit? How did he even get out of camp?*

Darkstar hurried towards Brokenmask with Driftswipe and Bonerun close behind him. Driftswipe spotted Fogkit and scampered over to her.

"Are you okay, Fogkit? Did Snowkit tell you he was leaving camp?"

Fogkit shook her head, no.

Bonerun growled, "That kit can't just behave for once..."

Darkstar cleared his throat for silence and eyed Brokenmask. "What happened exactly?"

"Moongaze, Lightfeather and I were patrolling the RiverClan border and we saw Snowkit wandering around by it," Brokenmask explained breathlessly as Moongaze paced with a lashing tail.

"When we were about to approach him, Batwing and Freezingpaw showed up and Snowkit crossed over," Brokenmask paused to let it sink in. "By the time we reached where they were, they were gone!"

Fogkit trembled, she heard bad stories about RiverClan. *They were going to hurt Snowkit!*

Bonerun addressed Darkstar, "I can lead a patrol to see if Dawnstar will be reasonable? StarClan would be against holding a kit hostage and she knows that!"

Darkstar took a heartbeat to think before answering, "I'll go there myself, along with Mintbreeze. I don't want them thinking we are looking for a fight."

Mintbreeze looked up, surprised.

Fogkit gasped, the leader *and* medicine cat leaving camp?

"Driftswipe, that's dangerous isn't it?" she asked her mother.

Driftswipe remained quiet, but wrapped her tail tightly around Fogkit. She looked to Bonerun expectedly.

Bonerun frowned. "That's too risky! You're both too important. We all know RiverClan is fox-hearted."

Cats yowled in agreement. Why wouldn't they? It's an opportunity for RiverClan to get an advantage over ShadowClan... maybe territory, or food. Fogkit thought the whole situation was mouse-brained.

Darkstar waved his tail for silence. "The decision is final. I'll go with Mintbreeze. I do not want them to see this as a threat. All we want is Snowkit back, we're not looking for a war. Not after what happened just six moons ago."

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Snowkit skipped around with glee. Now *this* was an interesting clan! He raised his head to Batwing. "I can't believe this is happening! Can I join RiverClan? Please? ShadowClan is so dull and moody..."

"We'll see. Dawnstar will have to speak to you first."

Freezingpaw nudged Snowkit. "Hey, Dawnstar is pretty fair, she'll probably let you in," he grinned.

Snowkit smirked and glanced around wildly. So many cats! He breathed in the smell, the river beginning to freeze over due to harsh chill of late leaf-fall, though he could still smell the aroma of fish. *That* was kind of gross, but he could get used to it...

A few cats looked at him warily as the trio made it further into camp.

"Doesn't he look a lot like Rapidstar?" one she-cat whispered to another.

*Rapidstar? Who? Wait—*

Snowkit frowned, remembering a story that Briarscratch once told him and Fogkit. A few moons ago there was a great battle between ShadowClan and RiverClan. But Rapidstar was the last RiverClan leader... so how could *he* look like Rapidstar?

Snowkit shook off the confusion as Batwing haulted in front of a den. "This is Dawnstar's den. She's been wanting to speak to you for awhile now after Goldenleaf received a message from StarClan. But I guess you already knew that from Freezingpaw."

Snowkit nodded as he recalled from a few moonrises before; Freezingpaw had snuck into Shadowclan's camp when it was dark. At first, Snowkit was afraid, but he soon warmed up to the idea of sneaking out of camp to visit the Riverclan leader.

"Well, she's waiting," Batwing drawled. Snowkit nodded before squeezing into the den.

He looked around in earnest, he's never been in a leader's den before. It was small, but it only needed to be big enough for Dawnstar and her mate. There were dried river flowers around the edges and vines hung across the top of the den. A large nest was towards the back, between two small logs. A big she-cat was sitting in the nest, and Snowkit's fur bristled once he realized she was staring at him.

"You must be Snowkit. Welcome to RiverClan. I'm Dawnstar."

The large she-cat didn't rise from her nest. Instead, she slowly drew her tongue over one paw, as if she had all the time in the world. Her gaze never left him.

"Now," she continued, her voice smooth, "you must be wondering why I asked to see you."

Snowkit nodded quickly, his tail flicking. Of course he was. Ever since Freezingpaw mentioned StarClan, he hadn't been able to stop thinking about it.

Dawnstar's eyes narrowed slightly.

"A few moons ago," she began, "StarClan visited our medicine cat, Goldenleaf, in her dreams. They spoke of something... unfinished. They said the Clans must come together to find the lost warriors."

She paused, letting the words settle. "Whatever that means," she added lightly, though there was something sharp beneath her tone.

Snowkit shifted his paws, unease prickling in his chest.

Dawnstar continued, "But you and I both know how the Clans are. ShadowClan won't trust RiverClan. RiverClan won't trust ShadowClan. When the time comes..." Her tail flicked once. "They'll hesitate."

Her gaze locked onto his.

"That's where you come in."

Snowkit stiffened.

"I need you," Dawnstar went on, her voice lowering, "to keep a watchful eye on ShadowClan. Listen. Observe. And report what you learn to Freezingpaw."

Snowkit's fur bristled instantly.

"Why would I do that?" he snapped. "I'm a ShadowClan cat. Why would I help you?"

Even as he said it, something twisted inside him. RiverClan didn't feel... wrong. Not entirely. But he didn't like the way she was looking at him—like he was something to be used.

Dawnstar's ears flattened, a low growl rumbling in her throat.

"I was getting to that, you impatient kit."

She rose slightly now, her presence suddenly filling the den.

"StarClan didn't speak your name for no reason," she said. "They told Goldenleaf that you are like Rapidstar."

Snowkit froze.

"...Rapidstar?" he echoed, his voice quieter now. "But how am I like him?"

Dawnstar gave a small shrug, though her eyes gleamed.

"Greatness doesn't always look the same at first," she murmured. "But it has a way of showing itself."

She stepped closer, her shadow falling over him.

"I wouldn't waste my time on some mouse-brained ShadowClan kit," she added coolly, "if there wasn't something... worth watching."

Snowkit's heart pounded. Part of him wanted to puff up with pride.

Another part of him wanted to run.

He swallowed. "I'm... nearly six moons," he muttered. "I'll be an apprentice soon."

Dawnstar's whiskers twitched.

"Good," she said. "That will make things much easier."

She turned away as if the conversation was already over.

"That's all. You may go."

Snowkit hesitated, unease still clawing at his chest.

"But—what about the 'lost warriors'?" he pressed. "What does that even mean?"

Dawnstar paused. For a heartbeat, the den was completely still.

She was about to reply when Batwing let out an angry yowl from

somewhere in camp, "Intruders!"

# Chapter 4- Two Faces

Snowkit squawked as Dawnstar shoved by him, growling. Riverclan cats hissed in anger outside the den. Snowkit quickly followed her, his tail twitching with worry. When he pushed past the reeds, he recoiled in fear as he saw Darkstar, who was looking murderous, with a shivering Mintbreeze beside him.

Snowkit pricked his ears curiously once he padded within earshot; the Riverclan cats had his leader and medicine cat backed into a corner.

"...What do you want? You aren't welcomed here!" Batwing spat and unsheathed his claws.

"Mouse-brain! You wouldn't dare attack a leader and a medicine cat. It's against the Warrior Code!" Mintbreeze hissed, but his voice trembled as he eyed Batwing's long claws.

A 'paw yowled from somewhere in the back, "No one follows the Warrior Code anymore!"

Snowkit winced as Darkstar's eyes flashed with anger, but he ignored the cats and turned to Dawnstar. "We aren't looking for a fight. A kit wandered out of camp and one of our patrols spotted him crossing the Riverclan border accompanied with some of your cats."

"Are you implying we stole one of your kits?" Dawnstar met his gaze carefully. She sat down neatly, curling her golden tail around her large paws.

"Of course not," Darkstar growled, "We just want him back safe."

Snowkit flinched, he knew he'd be in trouble when he went back home. *Mouse-dung!* What if his apprenticeship was delayed? He flattened his ears at the thought. He felt ashamed. He could already imagine the looks on his parents' faces. Suddenly, he regretted

leaving camp, and could no longer imagine himself ever leaving Shadowclan.

Mintbreeze, trembling, glanced past Dawnstar and spotted Snowkit. "Snowkit! There you are!"

Snowkit looked up abruptly at his name being called. All eyes were on him. He felt his ears burn with embarrassment at the sudden attention. He looked at his paws before muttering to Dawnstar, "May I go now?"

Dawnstar, ever so slightly, nodded. Snowkit rose to his paws and scuttled over to his leader and medicine cat, looking up tentatively. Darkstar stared at Snowkit with an expression he couldn't name.

"We'll be leaving," Darkstar growled, "Or will that be a problem?" He narrowed his eyes at the Riverclan cats who were still bristling.

Dawnstar waved her tail, signaling her cats to stand down. "Not at all, but I'll have some cats escort you out. We wouldn't want you getting lost now would we?" she purred slyly.

Dawnstar nodded to Batwing, Eaglestrike, and an apprentice named Gingerpaw, and the three cats jostled the Shadowclanners toward the camp exit.

Snowkit squeaked as Darkstar snatched him by the scruff and turned to leave. At that moment, Goldenleaf scurried out of the medicine cat den, and frantically looked around before spotting Mintbreeze. Snowkit watched as she whispered into his ear and he frowned as Mintbreeze's eyes widened with fear. Snowkit flicked his ears, *medicine cat stuff.*

Though, he managed to catch Mintbreeze's mutter, "We'll discuss it the next half-moon."

Darkstar grumbled through Snowkit's scruff, "Mintbreeze, let's go!"

Mintbreeze shot Goldenleaf an apologetic look and hurried after Darkstar. Before Darkstar swung his head forward, Snowkit caught the stares of a pair of young cats who looked awkwardly out of place in the midst of the Riverclanners. One was a calico she-cat,

with grey splotches, and a jagged split between her ears. The other was a tom, who was grey with a white belly, and had a split completely down his face—half grey, half white—with amber eyes.

*Weird.*

...

As the cats arrived at the shared border, Darkstar set Snowkit down and turned to the Riverclan cats. "Thank you, I'm sure we can find our way back from here."

Batwing started to growl, but Eaglestrike — who was older — cuffed his ear before dipping her head to Darkstar. "Of course. May Starclan light your path." She turned to leave, beckoning to the other cats to follow her.

Gingerpaw quickly scampered after her, but Batwing huffed, hesitating.

"Batwing! If you don't move your tail..."

Batwing snarled and hurried after his Clanmates, not before shooting Darkstar a scathing glare.

Darkstar and Mintbreeze stared after the Riverclan cats until they disappeared out of view. Snowkit shuffled his paws uneasily, there was still a question floating around in his mind. Was he in trouble? He knew he was, judging by the way Darkstar padded away without a word.

Mintbreeze shot Snowkit a sympathetic look before flicking his tail. "Come on. It won't be too bad." Mintbreeze turned to follow the dark furred leader.

Snowkit sighed, and scampered after them. The cats walked on in an uncomfortable silence for what seemed like moons. After the uneasiness stretched on for long enough, he couldn't take it anymore. Right as the camp came into view, Snowkit craned his neck to look up at Darkstar.

"D-Darkstar?" he mumbled.

Darkstar huffed, but didn't turn to him.

"Am I in trouble? I—"

Suddenly, Darkstar turned on him in a rage. "You mouse-brained kit! Do you realize what you did? You made us look *weak!* You made us look like we were under their paws. They could've asked for territory in trade of you. They could've..." he trailed off, seething. Darkstar's usual calm manner was completely gone, he was furious.

Mintbreeze shuffled his paws. "Darkstar, it's okay—"

Darkstar hissed, "It is *not!*" He glared at Snowkit. "Your apprenticeship will be a moon behind Fogkit's. Maybe that will teach you to follow the rules," he growled before hurrying into camp.

Snowkit's heart fell as his worries were confirmed. He felt so guilty. He flattened his ears in shame and his tail drooped. He never meant for any of this to happen! He just thought it was a game... and now his leader was angry at him! He couldn't even bear to think what Driftswipe and Bonerun were going to say after finding out his apprenticeship was delayed. He embarrassed himself, his clan, his *family.* He felt dirty.

Mintbreeze placed his tail over Snowkit's shoulders. "Darkstar is still touchy after what happened last new-leaf. Riverclan..." he sighed, "We're not on good terms with Riverclan."

Snowkit nodded, but Mintbreeze's words hardly comforted his burning ears. He quietly scuttled into camp without another look back.

# Chapter 5- Hello Darkness, My Old Friend

Two moons had passed since Snowkit's little adventure to Riverclan. Fogkit had tried to ask him what happened after Darkstar and Mintbreeze brought him back, but he'd only answered with a growl. When she nagged him to tell her more, he turned on her with a snarl. Fogkit didn't ask again after that.

She later found out that his apprenticeship had been delayed, and her parents were furious with him. Snowkit only became angrier since. Fogkit didn't know whether to feel sorry for him, or satisfied that he was finally being taught a lesson. She supposed she felt sorry when he sullenly watched her from under the shadows of the nursery as she strutted up to the rock slope in front of Darkstar.

Darkstar had summoned a clan meeting at dusk; Fogkit was finally becoming an apprentice! She purred to herself, wondering who her mentor would be, but suddenly felt a twinge of guilt knowing Snowkit should be there with her. She sighed and shook her head lightly, she couldn't worry about him now.

Fogkit glanced behind herself; Driftswipe and Bonerun were proudly watching. Driftswipe purred loudly and Bonerun's chest was puffed out. Fogkit smiled as Bonerun gave her a nod of encouragement, and she turned back to Darkstar.

"...Fogkit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Fogpaw." Darkstar paused to nod at her. "Moongaze, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You have received excellent training from Smokefur..." He closed his eyes in a moment of grief. "...And you have shown yourself to be patient and loyal. You will be the mentor of Fogpaw, and I expect you to pass on all your knowledge to her."

Fogpaw respectively licked Darkstar's shoulder before turning to

touch noses with Moongaze. Her eyes gleamed with happiness as the clan called her name.

*Fogpaw, Fogpaw, Fogpaw!*

Driftswipe and Bonerun padded up to her proudly. Driftswipe licked her ears, "Congratulations, Fogpaw!"

"Thank you!" Fogpaw purred, blinking warmly at her parents.

Bonerun mewed, "You'll be a great warrior in time, if you listen to Moongaze!"

Fogpaw nodded earnestly, "Of course!"

Pinepaw scampered up to her. He mewed, "It's nice to have another apprentice around, even though I'll be a warrior in the next moon!"

Fogpaw turned to him, nodding. "Maybe we can train together! Nettlekit and Snowpa— Snowkit will be joining us soon too." She was unsure if she should call Snowkit by his apprentice name or not.

Fogpaw glanced over to the nursery, her brother had disappeared. She frowned, couldn't he congratulate her at least? She knew he was upset, but can't he be happy for her?

Pinepaw touched his tail to her shoulder, "Don't worry about him, Fogpaw. It makes sense that he's upset."

Fogpaw nodded, Pinepaw was right; she shouldn't be so selfish to expect Snowkit to be happy for her, he wasn't going to be when he was so miserable. She turned to Moongaze who had been waiting for her and she felt a flash of embarrassment once she realized she'd accidentally ignored him.

"Moongaze! I'm sorry, I—"

He purred, "It's okay. Get a good night's rest and be up by dawn, I'm going to be showing you the territory tomorrow."

Fogpaw nodded in excitement, she realized the sun was almost

down now; the bright oranges and reds in the sky being chased away by the advancing dark blues of the night.

Pinepaw led her to the apprentice den and showed her a nest next to his that she could have. She laid in it gratefully, relieving her tired paws as she curled up in a ball. She thought about what had happened that day, and relished in the idea that she was finally an apprentice.

*I'm going to be the greatest warrior of Shadowclan!*

...

"Fogpaw! Fogpaw! Help us!"

Fogpaw looked around wildly for the source of the voice, but she saw nothing except darkness. She swung a paw out, bristling when she only felt air.

"Who's there?" Fogpaw called nervously.

There were heartbeats of silence when she suddenly felt a presence brush beside her.

"Find them."

At that moment, an image of a gorge filled with cats flickered so briefly in Fogpaw's mind she wondered if she'd imagined it.

Then everything fell and rose all at once.

Fogpaw cried out in fear as she was sucked into the gloom. She feebly clawed at the fantastical jaws gripping her fur, only to be whisked farther and farther down.

"No!" Fogpaw yowled as the dark substance reached for her throat, twisting and pulling, engulfing her small body.

"Find them or the Clans will be lost to the darkness!" The voice rang in her ears and it echoed louder and louder and louder until...

All was quiet.

*Suddenly, Fogpaw found herself at the bottom of a ravine. The sky was grey and pelting rain, and her fur was plastered to her body. Mud squelched beneath her paws, caking her fur. A side of her face felt numb and one of her eyes were swollen shut. Blood trickled from her mouth.*

*Drip, drip, drip.*

*She was bigger then, maybe a warrior, or something more. It was as if it was and wasn't her all at once. She felt different... was this the future or the past?*

*For whatever reason, Fogpaw felt like she didn't have much time left.*

*Looking around, she spotted a motionless, silvery body a few fox-lengths away. It was broken and twisted. Surprisingly, she could have sworn she saw its tail twitch ever so slightly.*

*Then Fogpaw felt something move against her. Glancing down, she fixed her stare on to two withering bodies at her belly.*

*Kits.*

*Somehow over the rain, she managed to hear paw-steps heartbeats before a large, golden she-cat came into view. Fogpaw squinted with her one good eye before realizing that the she-cat must be a Riverclan cat. She tried to cringe away from the cat, only to find her body locked in place. What was this?*

*Fogpaw felt her mouth move involuntarily, "Dawnlight! Please take them!"*

*Dawnlight? Was this she-cat Dawnstar but as a warrior? So this was the past, maybe even a memory...*

*"Splitstar—"*

"Fogpaw! Wake up!"

Fogpaw jerked awake, met with Pinepaw's worried grey eyes. His face was crinkled in mixed irritation and anxiety.

"Great Starclan, finally!"

"Wha...?" Fogpaw mumbled, blinking the sleep out of her eyes.

"You were thrashing around like a fish straight out of the river! You even nicked my nose! Look," Pinepaw exclaimed, shoving his scratched nose into Fogpaw's face. "It took me forever just to wake you! Were you having a nightmare?" He sat back, frowning at her.

Fogpaw rose to her haunches, only to realize her pelt was, in fact, a mess. Small twigs and scraps of moss littered her fur. To her astonishment, her nest was completely ruined, as she must've broken it while flailing about in her sleep.

"Fogpaw?" Pinepaw inquired.

Fogpaw shook her head. "Yeah, it was something like that," she muttered.

Yes, it was true. Fogpaw had been having recurring dreams for the past moon now. Sometimes they were dark and filled with voices or faces. Other times they were like memories, almost as if she had lived a past life. She didn't know what any of them meant, or if they even resembled anything. But somewhere in the back of her mind, she was pushed to believe that her dreams were important.

"Look, well, it's almost dawn and I'm on the first patrol, so I gotta get going." Pinepaw shot her an apologetic glance before ducking out of the den.

That's right! Moongaze wanted to show her the territories at dawn. Fogpaw felt a twinge of excitement and hopped to her paws before remembering that her pelt was still a mess. She embarrassedly licked her fur clean from the leaves and scraps of moss. Sighing, she hurried out of the apprentices den and was surprised to find the camp already full of hustle and bustle.

Across the clearing, near the nursery, Crystalfall was grooming Nettlekit. The she-cat had a litter of kits before but they died from a late spout of green-cough in newleaf. It was almost as if she was cursed when she had a second litter of only one kit. Fogpaw felt sorry for Crystalfall, though she never showed it around her. Knowing the she-cat, Crystalfall would probably think she was

mocking her and would have a fit.

Turning, Fogpaw fixed her stare on the dawn patrol. Like Pinepaw said, he was waiting by the entrance with Bonerun, his mentor. Fogpaw was told that Bonerun had mentored Coldpaw and Splitstar had mentored Pinepaw. But after the events of the war between Shadowclan and Riverclan, Darkstar had decided to give Pinepaw as Bonerun's apprentice. It was only fair. Fogpaw watched as the two were joined by Lightfeather and Oakcloud; the light brown senior warrior dragged behind the patrol as they hurried out of the camp, and Fogpaw figured he would soon be joining the elders den.

Hearing paw-steps near her, Fogpaw turned to see Moongaze's friendly face.

"Good, you're up early! Have you eaten yet?"

Fogpaw shook her head and murmured apologetically, "No, not yet."

"Hurry and grab something. We're leaving soon," Moongaze mewed.

Fogpaw nodded and scampered to the fresh-kill pile. She sighed, looking at all the choices. *Maybe squirrel...* Nodding, she snatched up a squirrel and padded a few tail-lengths away before settling down to eat. She quickly gulped down the prey in a few clean bites and whisked a paw over her mouth, wiping the blood away.

*Snowkit should be up soon,* Fogpaw thought, glancing back to the nursery. She huffed, *I'll have to tell him about the territory today, he'll want to know about it.* Then she frowned, baffled. Snowkit already saw some of the territory since he snuck out of the camp. He's seen more than her and he was still a kit while she was an apprentice. *Whatever, he'll still want to know.*

Fogpaw rose to her paws before hurrying over to Moongaze who was waiting by the entrance.

"Right, let's go."

# Chapter 6- Déjà Vu

Fogpaw padded eagerly at Moongaze's side as they slipped out of the ShadowClan camp. The air beyond the clearing felt different—cooler, sharper, filled with scents she had never fully noticed before. Damp earth, pine, and something faintly bitter tickled her nose.

Her tail flicked with excitement. "So this is it?" she mewed, glancing around. "The territory?"

Moongaze let out a soft purr. "This is only the edge of it. There's much more to see."

Fogpaw lifted her chin, trying to look composed despite the way her paws tingled with anticipation. She didn't want to seem like an overexcited kit, not on her first day.

"First lesson," Moongaze mewed, slowing his pace. "Pay attention to the ground beneath your paws."

Fogpaw blinked, glancing down at the shadowy forest floor. "The... ground?"

Moongaze flicked his tail. "What do you notice?"

She hesitated, then crouched slightly, pressing her paw into the earth. It was soft, spongy with layers of pine needles and damp, frosted moss.

"It's... quiet?" she guessed.

Moongaze nodded approvingly. "Exactly. ShadowClan cats rely on stealth. The ground here helps us move without being heard. If you're careful, even a mouse won't notice you."

Fogpaw's eyes lit up. She lowered herself further, creeping forward with exaggerated care. Her paws sank silently into the earth, and she grinned.

"I can barely hear myself!" she whispered.

Moongaze's whiskers twitched with amusement. "That's the idea."

They moved deeper into the forest, shadows stretching long between the trees. The light filtered through in thin, silvery patches, and Fogpaw found herself drawn to the way everything seemed... quieter here. Not empty, just watchful.

"Over here," Moongaze mewed, leading her toward a cluster of thick undergrowth. "This is a good place to hunt."

Fogpaw sniffed the air, her nose twitching. "I smell... something."

Moongaze nodded. "Mouse. Stay low."

Fogpaw crouched, her heart beginning to race. She inched forward, trying to mimic Moongaze's movements. The scent grew stronger, warmer. Closer.

*There!*

A tiny shape rustled beneath the dried leaves.

Fogpaw sprang.

She landed a little too far to the side, her paws scattering leaves as the mouse darted away in a blur.

"No!" she squeaked, spinning around.

Moongaze padded forward calmly. "You were quick, but you need to be precise. Don't rush the leap."

Fogpaw's ears burned with embarrassment. "I almost had it..."

"And next time, you will," Moongaze said gently. "You have good instincts."

Fogpaw blinked, surprised. "Really?"

He nodded. "Really."

They continued on, weaving between trees and winding paths. Fogpaw tried to memorize everything—the shape of the land, the scents, the way the forest seemed to breathe around her.

After a while, they reached a clearing where the ground dipped. The trees thinned just enough to let in a dull, grey light, but it did little to brighten the hollow. The air felt heavier here, thick and unmoving, as if it had been sitting undisturbed for moons.

Fogpaw slowed, her excitement fading into something quieter. Unease prickled along her spine. The usual forest sounds—rustling leaves, distant birds—seemed to fade the farther she stepped into the clearing. Even the wind avoided the place.

The ground sloped downward in a deep, narrow valley, the soil darker, almost black, and packed tightly as though it had been pressed under countless paws. Scraps of brittle grass clung to the edges, but the center was bare.

A faint, metallic tang lingered in the air.

Fogpaw's nose twitched. "What is this place?" she murmured.

Moongaze stopped.

For a moment, he didn't answer.

"It's nothing you need to worry about right now," he said finally, though his voice had grown softer. "Just remember it's here."

Fogpaw frowned, glancing around. The clearing felt familiar somehow, though she knew she had never been there before. A strange feeling stirred in her chest. Like she had seen it... somewhere else.

Her gaze drifted to the center of the ravine. For the briefest heartbeat, her vision flickered.

Dark clouds.
Rain.
Something crumpled in the mud.

Fogpaw blinked hard, her breath catching. Before she could think on it further, Moongaze turned away. "Come. There's more to show you."

Fogpaw hesitated, then followed.

...

As the sun climbed higher, the forest began to warm, though the chill of leaf-bare still lingered in the air. The sounds of life grew louder—birds calling overhead, and dry, brittle leaves skittering across the frozen ground in the breeze.

Eventually, they reached a narrow path where the trees thickened slightly. The shadows here were lighter, broken by streaks of pale sunlight that filtered through the branches above. The ground was firmer beneath Fogpaw's paws, less cushioned by pine needles, and the scents shifted—faint traces of unfamiliar cats lingered along the edges of the trail.

Moongaze slowed, his ears flicking as he scanned the forest ahead.

"Be careful here," he mewed, his voice lower now. "We're close to the ThunderClan border."

Fogpaw's ears perked immediately. She lifted her head, sniffing the air again. The scent was sharper here, strange, but not entirely unpleasant. Different.

"Have you ever fought another Clan cat?" she asked, her voice hushed despite her curiosity.

Moongaze gave a small huff, though his gaze remained fixed on the trees beyond the path. "More than once."

Fogpaw's eyes widened. She padded a little closer to him, her tail brushing lightly against his flank. "Were you scared?"

Moongaze didn't answer right away.

A breeze stirred the leaves overhead, carrying the distant rustle of movement. Perhaps prey... or something else. His posture stiffened

slightly, as if he were listening to something far beyond what Fogpaw could hear.

"...Every time," he admitted at last.

Fogpaw glanced up at him, surprised. He didn't look like a cat who got scared.

Moongaze's gaze softened as he looked down at her. "But being brave doesn't mean you aren't scared," he continued quietly. "It means you keep going anyway. Even when every part of you is telling you to run."

Fogpaw nodded slowly, her tail curling around her paws as she took in his words. She tried to imagine herself standing at a border, facing another cat with unsheathed claws.

Her chest tightened.

Still... she lifted her chin slightly.

"I think I could do that," she murmured.

Moongaze's whiskers twitched with a faint, approving purr. "I think you could too."

For a moment, they stood in silence, the border stretching quietly before them. An invisible line marked only by scent and tension.

Then Moongaze flicked his tail. "Come on. We won't linger here."

Fogpaw cast one last glance toward the trees beyond the path before turning to follow.

...

On their way back, they ran into Pinepaw near the edge of camp. He looked slightly out of breath, as if he had just returned from patrol.

"Fogpaw!" he mewed, padding over. "How was your first time out?"

Fogpaw beamed. "It was amazing! I almost caught a mouse—"

"Almost?" Pinepaw teased, flicking her ear lightly with his tail.

Fogpaw huffed. "I will catch one tomorrow."

Moongaze let out a quiet purr. "She's off to a good start."

Pinepaw grinned. "I'd expect nothing less."

Fogpaw felt warmth bloom in her chest, though she wasn't sure why.

As they stepped back into camp, the familiar scents of ShadowClan wrapped around her. But something felt different now.

*Bigger.*

Like the world had opened up just a little more.

Moongaze paused beside her. "Get some rest. We'll continue your training tomorrow."

Fogpaw nodded. "Okay!"

She turned toward the nursery, remembering the earlier promise she made to herself to see Snowkit, but stopped.

For a moment, her gaze drifted toward the medicine cat den.

The entrance was dark, shadowed, and still. A strange feeling tugged at her chest again, faint and persistent.

Fogpaw blinked, shaking her head quickly.

*Mouse-brain. It's nothing.*

But as she padded away, she couldn't shake the feeling that something inside that den was waiting.

# Chapter 7- You Could Be More

Snowkit lingered at the edge of the nursery, his tail curled tightly around his paws as he watched the camp beyond. A few weeks had passed since Fogpaw had begun her training, and in that time everything had seemed to shift—just slightly, but enough that he couldn't ignore it. She moved differently now, more sure of herself, like she belonged among the apprentices instead of tucked away in the nursery. Even the way the other cats looked at her had changed. They noticed her.

Snowkit dug his claws into the ground.

*I'm supposed to be there too.*

Across the clearing, Fogpaw padded alongside Moongaze, her head lifted as she spoke, Pinepaw trotting beside her with an easy confidence that made something twist uncomfortably in Snowkit's chest. They looked like they fit. Like they had already found their place.

Snowkit looked away sharply, his tail lashing once behind him.

*Mouse-brain. It doesn't matter.*

And yet, it did.

The call came suddenly, ringing across the clearing and cutting through the low hum of camp life.

"All cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Highrock!"

Snowkit's head snapped up, his ears pricking forward. His heart gave a sharp, hopeful leap before he could stop it.

*This was it.*

Cats began to gather quickly, murmurs rippling through the

clearing as warriors, apprentices, and elders turned their attention toward Darkstar. Snowkit rose to his paws, forcing himself not to rush as he made his way forward. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Nettlekit slipping out from the nursery as well, her gaze bright and alert.

They shared a brief glance.

Neither of them said anything.

They didn't need to.

Darkstar stood tall upon the Highrock, his yellow eyes sweeping over the assembled Clan before settling.

"Today, we gather to recognize those who are ready to begin their training."

Snowkit felt his chest tighten.

"Snowkit. Nettlekit."

A hush fell over the clearing.

"You have both reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed."

The words settled over him slowly, like something heavy and real finally taking shape.

"From this day forward, Snowkit, you will be known as Snowpaw."

For a heartbeat, Snowpaw didn't move.

Then he lifted his head, standing a little taller as the name echoed in his mind.

*Snowpaw.*

He padded forward, his paws feeling oddly heavy beneath him. He rose onto his hind legs and respectfully licked Darkstar's shoulder, the leader's fur cool beneath his tongue.

"Nettlekit, you will be known as Nettlepaw."

Nettlepaw followed just after Snowpaw, mirroring the gesture before stepping back.

Darkstar's tail flicked once before he continued, his gaze shifting.

"Vineclaw, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You are observant, patient, and know the forest well. You will mentor Snowpaw."

Snowpaw blinked in surprise, his gaze snapping toward the lean brown tom. Vineclaw stepped forward, his ivy-like tabby streaks catching the light as he dipped his head slightly. There was nothing overly warm in his expression, but there was something steady there. Assessing.

"I will," Vineclaw mewed.

"Nettlepaw, you will train under Flowerdew."

The Clan began to call their new names, voices rising around them.

"Snowpaw! Nettlepaw!"

The sound filled the clearing, louder than anything Snowpaw had ever heard before. It wrapped around him, pressing into his chest, into his paws, into every part of him that had been waiting for this moment.

*Snowpaw. At last.*

As the meeting broke apart, Snowpaw barely had time to steady himself before familiar scents surrounded him.

"Snowpaw!" Fogpaw's voice came first, bright and warm as she hurried over, her soft green eyes shining. "You finally did it!"

Driftswipe followed close behind, her eyes bright as she pressed her muzzle briefly to the top of his head. "We're so proud of you," she murmured.

Bonerun stood just behind her, his posture straighter, more reserved. His blue eyes glanced over Snowpaw carefully, as if measuring him.

Snowpaw shifted his paws slightly under their attention. "I told you I would," he muttered, trying to keep his voice steady.

Fogpaw gave a small purr, nudging his shoulder. "Now we're both apprentices," she said. "I can show you everything I've learned so far —"

"I don't need help," Snowpaw cut in a little too quickly.

The words hung in the air for a heartbeat.

Fogpaw blinked, taken aback, her ears flattening slightly.

Driftswipe's tail curled tighter around her paws, though her voice remained gentle. "Fogpaw just means well."

"I know," Snowpaw said, quieter now, though he didn't quite meet her gaze.

Bonerun stepped forward then, his voice low but firm. "Being an apprentice isn't just about wanting it. It's about discipline. Listening. Learning from your mistakes."

Snowpaw's ears twitched. "I will," he replied, more sharply than he intended.

Bonerun held his gaze for a moment longer before giving a short nod. "See that you do."

The tension eased slightly as Driftswipe brushed her tail along Snowpaw's side again, her expression softening. "We'll let you get settled," she mewed.

Fogpaw lingered a heartbeat longer before offering him a small smile. "I'm glad you're here," she said quietly, before turning to follow their parents.

Snowpaw watched them go, something twisting faintly in his chest.

As the camp slowly returned to its usual rhythm, Vineclaw approached him with measured steps, his gaze sharp but not unkind. Snowpaw straightened instinctively.

"You've got quick eyes," Vineclaw said, studying him. "I've seen you watching the camp. That's a good start. But watching isn't enough."

Snowpaw dipped his head slightly, unsure how to respond.

"We'll begin at dawn," Vineclaw continued. "Be ready. I won't wait for you."

"I will be," Snowpaw replied quickly.

Vineclaw gave a small nod, then turned and slipped back into the flow of the camp, leaving Snowpaw standing there.

He should have felt proud.

He did feel proud.

Didn't he?

Snowpaw moved toward the edge of the clearing, his thoughts tangled as the noise of the camp faded slightly behind him. Everything had finally fallen into place. This was what he had wanted.

So why did it still feel... off?

*They're watching you now.*

Snowpaw froze.

The thought slipped into his mind so clearly, so suddenly, that his breath caught in his throat. He glanced around sharply, ears twitching.

No one was near him.

Fogpaw was speaking with Pinepaw near the apprentice den. Nettlepaw had already bounded over to Flowerdew. The rest of the

Clan had begun to return to their tasks.

No one was paying attention to him.

Snowpaw swallowed, his fur prickling. *Mouse-brain. That was just you.*

He took a step forward.

*You made them wait.*

Snowpaw's claws slid out against the ground. *That wasn't—*

His ears flattened, his gaze darting again. Still nothing. Just the camp, normal as ever.

*They don't respect you.*

A flicker of heat sparked in his chest, sharp and sudden. His gaze shifted, almost without meaning to.

Fogpaw, Pinepaw, Seedpaw. Even Nettlepaw. They all seemed so certain. So sure of where they belonged.

Snowpaw's tail lashed once.

*You could be more.*

The voice—no, the thought—softened, almost coaxing now, curling through his mind like something patient and waiting.

Snowpaw squeezed his eyes shut. *Stop.*

When he opened them again, the feeling faded, leaving only the steady hum of the camp and the sound of distant voices.

"I'm fine," he muttered under his breath.

He turned toward the apprentice den, lifting his chin slightly.

Tomorrow, training would begin.

Tomorrow, everything would make sense.

But as he padded away, something lingered at the edges of his thoughts.

# Chapter 8- Fractures

The morning air was sharp with leaf-bare chill as Fogpaw padded with Moongaze into the training hollow, her breath faintly misting in front of her. Frost clung to the edges of the grass, crunching softly beneath her paws as she crossed the clearing. Pinepaw and Snowpaw were already there, circling each other in loose, restless steps while Nettlepaw watched from the side, her tail flicking with anticipation.

Moongaze halted near the edge of the hollow, his pale pelt catching the weak sunlight filtering through the trees. Vineclaw lingered nearby, silent and watchful, while Flowerdew sat a little farther back, her gaze calm but attentive.

Bonerun was nowhere in sight.

Fogpaw slowed slightly as she approached, her eyes flicking briefly toward the empty space where he might have been. A patrol, maybe. Or something else.

"About time," Pinepaw meowed lightly, though there was no bite to it.

Fogpaw smirked in response. "I'm here, aren't I?"

Nettlepaw gave a small purr, stepping forward. "We're practicing battle pairings today," she said, glancing toward the warriors. "At least, that's what I heard."

Moongaze's voice cut in before anyone else could respond. "You heard correctly."

The apprentices straightened instinctively.

"You won't always fight alone," he continued, his amber eyes sweeping over them. "Learning how to partner with another cat, how to read them and trust them, can mean the difference between

winning and losing a fight. Today, you will be exercising this through formations."

Fogpaw felt a flicker of excitement spark in her chest.

"Fogpaw, Nettlepaw—you'll work together," Moongaze went on.

Nettlepaw's ears perked, and she gave Fogpaw a quick, eager glance.

"Snowpaw, Pinepaw—you're the other pair."

Snowpaw's shoulders stiffened almost imperceptibly, though he said nothing. Pinepaw only dipped his head, already focused.

"Flowerdew will guide Fogpaw and Nettlepaw," Moongaze added, "and Vineclaw will oversee Snowpaw and Pinepaw. I'll be watching both."

Fogpaw shifted her paws as she faced Nettlepaw, trying to steady the quick rhythm of her heartbeat. This was different from basic training. This meant relying on someone else.

"Ready?" Nettlepaw asked, her copper eyes bright.

Fogpaw nodded. "Ready."

Across the hollow, Snowpaw and Pinepaw had already begun warming up, hopping back and forth like rabbits. Snowpaw's tail waved once, his gaze fixed intently on Pinepaw as Vineclaw murmured something low to them.

"Try to keep up," Pinepaw meowed lightly, a teasing edge in his voice.

Snowpaw's ears twitched. "Worry about yourself."

"Focus," Flowerdew mewed gently, drawing Fogpaw's attention back. "Stay aware of each other. Don't just watch your opponent, watch your partner too."

Fogpaw dipped her head, taking a breath.

"You'll be facing them," Flowerdew added, flicking her tail toward Snowpaw and Pinepaw. "Work together."

Fogpaw's ears pricked.

Nettlepaw gave a small, excited grin. "We've got this."

The four apprentices took their places, forming a loose circle in the hollow. For a heartbeat, everything was still.

Then—

"Go," Moongaze called.

Pinepaw moved first, darting forward in a quick feint toward Nettlepaw before twisting sharply toward Fogpaw instead. Snowpaw followed close behind, aiming to cut her off from the side.

"Left!" Nettlepaw called.

Fogpaw barely had time to react before instinct kicked in. She pivoted just in time as Snowpaw lunged in from the side, his paw slicing through the air where she had just been, clipping her tail.

"Too slow," Snowpaw muttered under his breath.

Fogpaw flicked her tail, circling wider. "Not quite."

Nettlepaw sprang forward at the same moment, intercepting Pinepaw with a quick, low tackle that sent them both skidding across the frosted ground. "Got you!"

"Not for long—" Pinepaw twisted free, shoving her back with a quick push.

"Good!" Vineclaw called.

Fogpaw circled quickly, trying to keep both Snowpaw and Pinepaw in sight. Snowpaw turned on her again, faster this time, his movements sharper, more force behind them than before.

Fogpaw ducked under his swipe, twisting to the side as Nettlepaw broke free from Pinepaw and rejoined her. For a moment, they moved together without thinking, Fogpaw drawing Snowpaw's attention while Nettlepaw darted in from the side, forcing him to retreat a step.

It felt... right.

"Split them," Snowpaw said sharply.

Pinepaw hesitated a fraction too long.

Fogpaw noticed. "Stay together," she whispered to Nettlepaw.

Paws struck the ground harder, breath came quicker, movements sharpened. Pinepaw lunged again, this time managing to shoulder into Nettlepaw and knock her slightly off balance. Snowpaw took the opening instantly, darting past Fogpaw to try and separate them.

They adjusted instantly. Fogpaw drew Snowpaw's attention, stepping forward just enough to bait him, while Nettlepaw circled behind. Snowpaw lunged, and Nettlepaw darted in from the side, forcing him to pull back.

Fogpaw reacted without thinking, springing after Nettlepaw and placing herself between her and Snowpaw. She swiped forward—not to hit, but to force him back—just as Nettlepaw regained her place beside her.

Snowpaw's tail lashed. "Watch it," he snapped.

Pinepaw rejoined him, a little breathless now. "You're rushing."

"I'm not," Snowpaw shot back.

"Then stop acting like it."

For a heartbeat, their movements fell slightly out of sync.

Fogpaw took the opening. "Now!" she called.

She sprang, forcing Pinepaw to step back, while Nettlepaw swept in beside her, cutting Snowpaw off again.

For a heartbeat, everything clicked. They moved as one.

"Again," Flowerdew called.

Fogpaw lunged forward—

And her paw slipped.

The frost beneath her gave way, sending her weight pitching sideways. Before she could correct herself, she collided hard with Nettlepaw, claws scraping against frozen ground as pain shot up her foreleg.

She gasped, stumbling back. The hollow went still.

"Fogpaw?" Nettlepaw's voice came quickly, concerned.

Fogpaw tried to steady herself, but when she put weight on her paw, a sharp jolt of pain made her flinch. "I—I'm fine," she started, though her voice faltered.

Moongaze was already moving toward her, his expression tightening as he examined her leg. "You're not," he said quietly. "Don't put weight on it."

"I just slipped—"

"And that's enough," he cut in gently.

Flowerdew stepped closer, her gaze soft but firm. "You should see Mintbreeze."

Fogpaw hesitated, glancing briefly toward the others. Vineclaw was nodding in agreement with Flowerdew. Snowpaw stood a short distance away, his gaze fixed on her, frowning and hard to read. Pinepaw stood beside him, ears flicked backward with worry.

"I can walk," Fogpaw murmured.

Moongaze nodded once. "Then I'll walk with you."

...

The camp felt quieter when they returned, the usual activity dimmed beneath the weight of the cold day. Fogpaw kept her steps careful, though each one sent a dull ache through her leg.

"Go on," Moongaze mewed as they reached the medicine cat den. "I'll let them know you're out for the rest of training."

Fogpaw dipped her head before ducking inside. The scent of herbs wrapped around her instantly—sharp, earthy, familiar.

Mintbreeze looked up from where he was sorting leaves, his green eyes narrowing slightly as he took in her uneven stance. Seedpaw stood nearby, ears perking with interest.

"What happened?" Mintbreeze asked.

"Training," Fogpaw admitted. "I slipped."

Mintbreeze sighed softly, padding over. "Sit."

Fogpaw obeyed, settling onto the moss as he gently lifted her injured paw, his touch careful but firm.

"Not broken," he murmured after a moment. "Just strained. You'll need to rest it."

Seedpaw stepped closer, placing a bundle of herbs beside him. "Should I get comfrey?"

Mintbreeze nodded. "And some cobweb."

...

Fogpaw shifted slightly as they worked to bind her paw, her gaze drifting around the den.

That was when she noticed her.

At the far edge of the den, partially shadowed by hanging herbs, a

still form lay stretched across a nest. The she-cat didn't move. Her breathing was so faint Fogpaw almost missed it entirely.

"...Who is that?" Fogpaw asked quietly.

Seedpaw paused, his expression flickering.

Mintbreeze didn't answer right away.

"That's Splitstar," Seedpaw said instead, his voice softer now.

Fogpaw blinked. Her thoughts whirled.

*Splitstar?*

"But... she's—"

"Not dead," Mintbreeze finished, his tone measured. "Not exactly."

Fogpaw stared, her heart beginning to pound.

Splitstar didn't look like a leader. She didn't look like anything at all.

Just... still.

"How long has she been like that?" Fogpaw whispered.

"A long time," Seedpaw replied.

Mintbreeze's gaze flicked briefly toward Splitstar before returning to Fogpaw's paw. "Long enough that most cats have stopped asking."

Fogpaw swallowed, her eyes drawn back to the unmoving figure. The dim light filtered through the hanging herbs above, casting faint, shifting shadows across Splitstar's still form.

A strange feeling stirred faintly in Fogpaw's chest, tightening slowly, like something she couldn't quite name.

*Why does this feel familiar?*

Her ears twitched as she stared, her gaze tracing the rise and fall—if

there even was one—of Splitstar's flank. It was so faint, so easy to miss, that for a moment Fogpaw wondered if she had imagined it entirely.

*I've never been here before... so why does it feel like I have?*

The same quiet unease crept over her, curling along her spine. Like standing at the edge of that ravine in the forest. The thought sent a faint shiver through her paws.

For a heartbeat, the world seemed to tilt slightly, the den around her fading just enough that everything felt distant and blurred at the edges. Fogpaw blinked. And for the briefest moment, she thought she saw it—

Splitstar's flank rising a little deeper than before, as if she had taken a fuller breath.

Fogpaw's breath caught.

*Did she just—?*

She leaned forward ever so slightly, her eyes widening. But just as quickly, it was gone. The movement stilled. The den returned to its quiet, unmoving rhythm, as though nothing had happened at all.

Fogpaw stayed frozen where she was, her heart beating just a little faster now.

*No... I saw that. I know I did.*

Mintbreeze finished binding her paw. "You'll stay here for a while," he said. "No training until I say so."

Fogpaw barely heard him. Her gaze remained fixed on Splitstar.

On the cat who was there—

But not.

# Chapter 9- Between Breaths

*The first time Moongaze visited her, the den still smelled faintly of blood.*

*It clung to the stone, to the moss beneath her, to the air itself—like the forest hadn't yet decided to let go of what had happened.*

*He paused at the entrance, his paws feeling heavier than they should have.*

*Splitstar lay where Mintbreeze had placed her, her calico fur dulled beneath the dim light filtering through the herbs. One side of her face—orange, with that clear blue eye—was turned slightly toward him. The other, black, shadowed, her green eye closed and still.*

*She didn't move.*

*Moongaze stepped forward slowly.*

*"They... made Darkstar leader," he murmured, his voice quiet, like speaking too loudly might break something fragile. "The Clan needed someone. You know how they are."*

*His gaze flicked briefly to her flank, searching.*

*Nothing.*

*"He went to the Moonstone," Moongaze continued after a moment. "But StarClan didn't give him his nine lives. They said..." He hesitated, his throat tightening. "They said you're still here."*

*His ears lowered slightly.*

*"So... he's leading. For now."*

*Silence settled between them.*

*Moongaze lowered himself beside her nest, his tail curling around his paws.*

*"I thought you'd be back by now," he admitted softly.*

*...*

*Newleaf came and went.*

*The forest warmed, prey returned, and the Clan slowly began to move forward—because it had to.*

*Moongaze visited her every day.*

*"Driftswipe had her kits," he said one afternoon, settling beside her as sunlight filtered faintly into the den. "Two of them. A she-kit and a tom."*

*He glanced at her, a faint, almost tired smile touching his expression.*

*"You'd like them," he added. "The she-kit's curious. Always asking questions. And the tom..." He paused. "He reminds me of someone."*

*Moongaze let out a quiet breath.*

*"They named them Fogkit and Snowkit."*

*His gaze lingered on her face, searching for something, anything.*

*"You would've been there," he murmured. "You always are."*

*But not this time.*

*...*

*Greenleaf settled over the forest in slow, steady warmth.*

*The Clan grew stronger. Patrols returned to their usual rhythms. Apprentices trained. Kits tumbled through the camp like nothing had ever changed.*

*But the medicine cat den stayed the same.*

*"They're doing well," Moongaze said one evening, his voice softer now, worn at the edges. "The Clan, I mean."*

*He shifted slightly, his shoulder brushing the edge of her nest.*

*"Darkstar's holding things together. Bonerun's... Bonerun," he added, a faint flick er of dry humor in his tone. "And Mintbreeze hasn't left your side much."*

*His gaze dropped.*

*"I haven't either."*

*The words came out quieter than he meant them to.*

*"I miss you."*

*The admission hung in the air, heavier than anything else he had said.*

*Moongaze closed his eyes briefly.*

*"You're supposed to be here," he continued, his voice barely above a whisper. "You're supposed to be leading. Arguing with Driftswipe. Telling me I'm wrong about something."*

*A faint, broken huff of a breath escaped him.*

*"You're not supposed to just..." He stopped, unable to finish.*

*He opened his eyes again, looking at her.*

*"Wake up," he said quietly. "Please."*

*...*

*Moons passed.*

*The warmth of greenleaf faded into the slow, creeping chill of leaf-fall, and then into the quiet stillness of leaf-bare.*

*And still—*

*She did not wake.*

*On the day after both kits had become apprentice s , Moongaze returned to the den later than usual.*

*"Fogpaw and Snowpaw," he said, settling beside her once more. "They've*

*grown a lot."*

*A pause.*

*"I was given Fogpaw as my apprentice."*

*His ears twitched slightly, something softer passing through his expression.*

*"She reminds me of you."*

*Moongaze glanced at her, his gaze lingering longer this time.*

*"Not just in how she acts," he added. "There's something else. I can't explain it."*

*He exhaled slowly.*

*"She's always watching. Like she's trying to understand something no one else can see."*

*His tail curled tighter around his paws.*

*The den was quiet. Unchanging.*

*Moongaze leaned forward slightly, lowering his head so his voice wouldn't carry beyond her nest.*

*"If you can hear me," he murmured, "if you're still out there somewhere..."*

*He hesitated.*

*"...find your way back."*

*For a moment, nothing happened.*

*The same stillness. The same silence.*

*But Moongaze didn't move. He stayed there, beside her, just as he always had.*

*Waiting.*

# Chapter 10- She's Still Here

The medicine cat den was quiet in the days that followed Fogpaw's respite.

She lay curled in her nest, her injured paw tucked carefully beneath her chest as the scent of herbs settled thickly around her. The steady rhythm of Mintbreeze's movements somewhere deeper in the den faded as her eyes grew heavier, the exhaustion from the day finally catching up to her. For a while, she simply listened—to the faint rustle of leaves outside, to the soft breathing of the cats around her, to the slow, almost imperceptible rise and fall of Splitstar's flank nearby.

*She's still here.*

The thought lingered as her eyelids slipped closed. And then something shifted.

Fogpaw's eyes opened to silence.

Not the quiet of the den, but something deeper, heavier, as if the world itself had been muffled. The air was cool against her fur, damp and still, and the ground beneath her paws felt unfamiliar, firmer than the soft moss she had been lying on moments before.

She pushed herself to her paws slowly, her ears twitching as she took in her surroundings.

The ravine.

Or something like it.

The shape of it was the same—the dip in the earth, the way the trees curved away at the edges—but everything felt... wrong. The colors were muted, washed in dull shades of grey and shadow, and the air carried a faint, metallic scent that made her nose wrinkle. The ground beneath her paws was damp, clinging slightly with each

step, as though it had been recently disturbed.

*I'm dreaming... aren't I?*

But it didn't feel like a dream.

Fogpaw took a cautious step forward, then another. The space around her seemed to stretch unnaturally, the edges of the ravine blurring slightly as if she were seeing them through water. Every sound she made felt softened, swallowed before it could echo.

She wasn't alone.

The thought came unbidden, settling in her chest with quiet certainty.

*Someone's here.*

Fogpaw turned slowly, her gaze sweeping across the hollow. At first, there was nothing; only shadows shifting faintly at the edges of her vision. But then, just for a moment, she caught it.

A flicker.

Calico fur, slipping between the dim light and shadow.

Fogpaw's breath caught.

"Hello?" she called, her voice sounding distant even to her own ears. "Is someone there?"

The shape stilled.

For a heartbeat, everything seemed to hold its breath.

Then—

A presence pressed gently against her thoughts.

Not a voice, not exactly. More like a feeling, familiar and distant all at once, like trying to remember something just out of reach.

Fogpaw took a step forward without thinking, her paws moving

instinctively toward it.

"I know you're there," she said, quieter now. "Please—"

The shadows shifted again, and this time she saw more.

A she-cat, standing just beyond the center of the ravine.

Her form was blurred at the edges, as though she were not fully part of the world around her. But Fogpaw could make out the split in her face—the clear divide of color, orange and black, one side catching the dim light while the other remained half-shadowed. For a fleeting moment, Fogpaw thought she saw her eyes, one blue and one green, flicker toward her.

Fogpaw's heart pounded.

*Splitstar...?*

She took another step forward, her chest tightening. "Can you hear me?"

The figure didn't move closer.

If anything, she seemed to waver, like a reflection in disturbed water.

Then, slowly—

Something reached back.

*Not lost...*

The thought brushed against Fogpaw's mind, faint and strained, like it had traveled a long distance just to reach her.

Fogpaw froze.

"What?" she whispered. "What do you mean?"

The presence flickered, unsteady.

*Here...*

Fogpaw's ears twitched, her gaze darting around the ravine.

"Here where?" she pressed, her voice rising slightly. "I don't understand—"

The ground beneath her paws shifted, the shadows deepened, and the figure faltered.

*They were never gone.*

The words came clearer this time.

Stronger.

And then—

They began to fade.

"No—wait!" Fogpaw stepped forward quickly, panic rising in her chest. "Don't go, I—"

The world lurched.

The air grew heavier, pressing in around her as the ravine blurred and twisted. The shape of Splitstar flickered once more before dissolving completely into shadow, the presence slipping away as though pulled by something unseen.

Fogpaw reached out—

And felt nothing.

She gasped as her eyes snapped open.

The medicine cat den rushed back into focus around her, the scent of herbs sharp in her nose as her breath came quicker than before. For a moment, she didn't move, her heart still racing as the remnants of the dream clung stubbornly to her thoughts.

*They were never gone...?*

Fogpaw turned her head slowly.

Splitstar lay exactly where she had before, still and unmoving.

But Fogpaw knew.

That hadn't just been a dream.

Her gaze lingered on the calico leader, her chest tightening with something she couldn't quite name—fear, confusion, something deeper than both.

*She's trying to tell me something.*

# Chapter 11- Can You Keep a Secret?

Fogpaw didn't move at first.

The den was still wrapped in the same quiet it had been when she fell asleep, the scent of herbs thick in the air and the faint rustle of leaves outside barely stirring the silence. For a few long moments, she simply lay there, her breathing shallow as the remnants of her dream clung stubbornly to her thoughts.

*They were never gone.*

The words echoed softly in her mind, clearer now than they had been before. Not like a memory. Not like something she had imagined.

Something real.

Fogpaw swallowed, her gaze shifting slowly across the den until it settled on the still form of Splitstar. The calico leader lay exactly as she had before—her fur dimmed beneath the shadow of the herbs, her breathing so faint it was almost impossible to see.

Nothing had changed.

And yet—

*I know what I saw.*

Fogpaw pushed herself up carefully, wincing slightly as her injured paw brushed against the moss. The pain grounded her, pulling her fully back into the present, but it didn't chase away the feeling that lingered beneath it.

That connection.

That pull.

Her eyes flicked again to Splitstar.

*What is she trying to tell me?*

"Your paw should stay still."

Mintbreeze's voice came from just behind her, calm but firm. Fogpaw flinched slightly, turning her head to see him watching her with quiet focus. Seedpaw—no, not Seedpaw anymore—stood beside him, a bundle of herbs in his jaws.

*Seedspring.*

The name still felt new, even though it had only been a few days since he had returned from the Moonstone. Fogpaw remembered how the Clan had gathered when he came back, the way his expression had changed—quieter, steadier somehow.

"You should rest," Seedspring added, setting the herbs down beside Mintbreeze. "It'll heal faster."

Fogpaw nodded quickly, lowering herself back into her nest.

"I will," she said.

Her voice sounded normal and steady.

Her thoughts were anything but.

...

For the rest of the morning, she said nothing.

Mintbreeze worked quietly, sorting herbs and speaking in low tones to Seedspring, who moved with careful purpose beside him. At one point, he asked Fogpaw to hold still while he checked her paw again, his touch gentle but precise.

"You'll be fine in a few more days," Seedspring assured her.

Fogpaw dipped her head. "That's good."

She hesitated.

Now would be the moment.

She could tell him.

She could explain what she saw—what she felt—and maybe he would understand. He spoke with StarClan now. If anyone would believe her...

Her gaze flicked toward Splitstar, then back to Seedspring.

*What if I'm wrong?*

The thought came quickly, sharp enough to make her pause.

*What if it* was *just a dream?*

Her tail curled tighter around her paws.

"...Did anything happen while I was asleep?" she asked instead, trying to keep her tone casual.

Seedspring glanced at her, then shook his head. "Nothing unusual."

Fogpaw nodded slowly.

*Nothing unusual.*

...

The rest of the week passed more quickly than she expected.

Her paw healed slowly but surely, until Mintbreeze finally allowed her to return to training. The cold of leaf-bare still lingered in the air, biting at her paws in the early mornings, but the routine quickly settled back into place. Nettlepaw remained as energetic as ever, easily falling into step beside her, while Flowerdew and Moongaze guided them with quiet patience.

Driftswipe eventually stopped fretting over her, and Bonerun—much to Fogpaw's relief—finally stopped murmuring his reassurances to his mate now that she was fully healed. Fogpaw silently thanked StarClan for that.

Pinepaw—

No.

*Pinesun.*

The change still caught her off guard.

He moved differently now, just as she had when she first became an apprentice. More certain. More grounded. Fogpaw noticed it in the way he carried himself, in the way other warriors spoke to him with quiet respect instead of easy familiarity.

In the way he smiled at her.

It wasn't the same as before. There was something more in it now—something warmer, like he saw her a little more clearly than the others did.

"You'll catch up soon," he had told her one afternoon, padding alongside her as they made their way back from a patrol. His shoulder brushed lightly against hers as they walked, casual and unbothered, like it had always been that way.

Fogpaw had glanced at him, just for a moment.

"You really think so?" she asked, quieter than she meant to.

Pinesun's whiskers twitched with a faint, amused warmth. "I know so," he replied. "You notice things other cats don't. That matters more than being the fastest or strongest."

Fogpaw felt something shift in her chest at that, subtle but impossible to ignore.

*He noticed that?*

She dipped her head slightly, hiding the blush creeping up her face. "Maybe," she murmured.

They walked in silence for a few steps after that, the cold air brushing against their fur, but it didn't feel uncomfortable. If

anything, it felt... easy.

Fogpaw had nodded.

But her thoughts had been elsewhere.

...

Every night, she dreamed.

Not always clearly.

Sometimes it was just a feeling—the same heavy stillness, the same distant presence just beyond her reach. Other times, she caught glimpses: shadowed shapes, the curve of the ravine, the flicker of mismatched eyes watching from somewhere she couldn't quite see.

And always—

*Find them.*

Fogpaw never told anyone.

Not Moongaze.

Not Nettlepaw.

Not even Seedspring or Mintbreeze.

The words stayed with her, tucked quietly beneath everything else, growing heavier with each passing day.

*If Splitstar chose me... there has to be a reason.*

# Chapter 12- Crossing the Line

Training with Vineclaw was nothing like Snowpaw had expected. The brown tom was quiet, sharp-eyed, and relentless in a way that made Snowpaw feel like he was always one step behind. Every mistake was corrected. Every hesitation pointed out.

"You're thinking too much," Vineclaw told him one morning, circling slowly as Snowpaw adjusted his stance. "Your body should move before your mind catches up."

Snowpaw's tail lashed once. "I am moving," he muttered.

He lunged forward, faster this time, aiming to prove him wrong—but his movement was off by just enough that Vineclaw sidestepped easily, his paw hooking Snowpaw's foreleg and sending him stumbling.

"Again," Vineclaw said.

Snowpaw pushed himself back up, his claws digging into the frozen ground.

Across the clearing, he caught sight of Fogpaw moving with Nettlepaw, their movements quick and in sync. Even now, she looked like she knew what she was doing. Like she belonged.

Snowpaw looked away.

"You're distracted," Vineclaw said.

Snowpaw's ears flattened. "I'm not."

Vineclaw didn't argue. He simply watched him for a moment longer before turning away. "We're done for today. Clear your head before the next session."

Snowpaw stood there for a moment, his chest rising and falling faster than it should have.

*Clear your head. Easy for him to say.*

...

That night, Snowpaw didn't return to the apprentice den right away.

The camp had settled into quiet, most of the Clan already asleep as the cold pressed in around the clearing. Snowpaw lingered near the edge of camp, his gaze fixed on the dark line of trees beyond.

He shouldn't go.

He knew that.

Dawnstar's words still lingered in his mind, tangled with something else—something quieter, more persistent.

*You could be more.*

Snowpaw swallowed.

He wasn't doing anything wrong, he just wanted to understand.

...

The forest was colder beyond camp, the ground stiff beneath Snowpaw's paws as he slipped between the trees. Frost clung to the edges of the undergrowth, crunching softly with each careful step he took. The familiar scent of ShadowClan faded slowly behind him as he passed Fourtrees, replaced instead by something sharper and cleaner—river water, reeds, and something distinctly unfamiliar.

RiverClan.

He slowed as he reached the border, his breath misting faintly in the air. For a moment, he simply stood there, his gaze fixed on the line where scents overlapped, where one territory became another.

*I shouldn't be doing this.*

The thought came quickly, instinctive.

But it didn't stop him.

Snowpaw stepped across.

Freezingpaw was already there, just beyond the line of reeds, exactly where they had agreed to meet every half-moon. The pale tom stood still against the winter-dulled landscape, his white fur almost blending into the frost, his blue eyes catching the faint light.

"You came back," Freezingpaw said, his voice calm, like he had never doubted it.

Snowpaw lifted his chin slightly, though his tail flicked once behind him. "I just want to understand what Dawnstar meant."

Freezingpaw held his gaze for a moment longer than necessary, as if weighing something unspoken. Then he gave a small nod and stepped closer, the frost crunching softly beneath his paws.

"Then listen."

Snowpaw's ears twitched forward, but he didn't move away as the space between them narrowed. He could feel the cold more sharply here—or maybe it wasn't the cold at all.

As Freezingpaw spoke, his voice stayed low, measured, as if the forest itself might be listening. Snowpaw found himself leaning in without meaning to, his thoughts sharpening despite the chill that seeped into his paws.

"The Clans think they understand everything," Freezingpaw murmured. "But they don't. They see what's in front of them and stop there."

Snowpaw's gaze flicked toward him, then back to the ground.

The words made sense—or at least, they felt like they did. The idea that something bigger was happening, something hidden just beneath the surface...

It pulled at him.

*Maybe this matters. Maybe I matter.*

Freezingpaw shifted slightly, just enough that their shoulders nearly brushed. "You feel it too, don't you?" he said, quieter now. "That something isn't right."

Snowpaw hesitated.

"...Yeah," he admitted, his voice softer than before.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

The forest was still around them, the quiet stretching out in a way that didn't feel empty—just... close.

Snowpaw became suddenly aware of *how* close they were. The faint warmth where their fur almost touched. The steady, unhurried way Freezingpaw looked at him—not like he was being judged, but like he was being understood.

It made something shift uncomfortably in his chest.

"You're different from the others," Freezingpaw observed after a moment, his voice low. "You can see that, can't you?"

Snowpaw's ears flicked, his gaze dropping briefly before lifting again.

"...I don't know."

Freezingpaw's whiskers twitched faintly, something almost like a small smile flickering across his expression.

"I think you know it," he said.

Something stirred at the back of Snowpaw's mind.

*Yes.*

Snowpaw stiffened, his claws pressing into the frozen ground as the word echoed faintly through him.

Not his, not entirely, but not unfamiliar either.

He didn't react. Didn't show it.

Instead, he held Freezingpaw's gaze, even as that quiet, unsettling feeling lingered just beneath the surface, watching and waiting.

Freezingpaw stepped back slightly, the moment breaking just enough to let the cold slip back in between them.

"You should go," he said. "Before someone notices."

Snowpaw hesitated.

Then nodded.

"...I'll come back," he added, before he could stop himself.

Freezingpaw's gaze softened, just slightly.

"I know."

Snowpaw turned and slipped back toward the ShadowClan border, the cold biting sharper now as he crossed back into familiar territory. But the feeling stayed with him—the weight of the conversation, the pull of something just out of reach...

And something else—quieter, warmer.

...

When he finally returned to camp, the forest was silent again.

Snowpaw slipped back into the apprentice den without a sound, curling into his nest as if nothing had happened. Around him, the steady breathing of Fogpaw and Nettlepaw filled the space, calm and even.

Normal.

Snowpaw closed his eyes.

*I'm just trying to help.*

The thought settled uneasily in his chest. And somewhere, far

deeper than before—

Something listened.

# Chapter 13- Mixed Messages

The full moon hung high above the forest, round and luminous, casting a pale silver light over the trees below. Its glow filtered through the bare branches, turning the frost along the ground into a faint shimmer. It was a night when the Clans would gather beneath Fourtrees—when old rivalries were supposedly set aside, if only for a few hours, beneath the watchful gaze of StarClan.

For Fogpaw and the other apprentices, it would be their first Gathering. After days of pleading and persistent begging, their mentors had finally agreed to let them come. Now, as they followed their Clan through the cold, moonlit forest, a quiet excitement stirred beneath Fogpaw's chest, mingling with the strange sense that this night would be more important than any of them yet understood.

Fogpaw padded beside Nettlepaw and Snowpaw, her breath misting faintly in front of her as she tried to match the steady pace of the patrol. Ahead of them, Darkstar led with Bonerun at his side, his dark grey pelt blending almost seamlessly into the shadows. Seedspring followed close behind, quieter than usual, while the warriors fanned out around them—Vineclaw and Flowerdew near the front, Moongaze just off to the side, his gaze constantly shifting as if he were watching more than just the path ahead.

It felt nice, traveling like this.

More purposeful.

"Did you hear about Toadpounce?" Nettlepaw whispered, leaning slightly closer to Fogpaw as they walked.

Fogpaw angled an ear toward her. "What about her?"

"She's expecting kits with Brokenmask," Nettlepaw said, her voice bright despite the cold. "Crystalfall said she's been helping her prepare a nest."

Fogpaw blinked. "Really?"

Snowpaw gave a small huff beside them. "That explains why Brokenmask's been acting strange lately."

Nettlepaw let out a soft purr. "It'll be nice, though. We haven't had new kits in a while."

"Especially with newleaf coming," Fogpaw added, glancing ahead at the thinning trees. "It'll make camp feel... fuller."

For a moment, the thought settled warmly in her chest.

Pinesun slowed slightly ahead of them, glancing back over his shoulder. "Try not to fall behind," he called lightly, though his tone was more teasing than strict.

Fogpaw flicked her tail in response, quickening her pace just enough to close the distance. As she drew closer, he fell into step beside her without hesitation, his shoulder brushing hers briefly as they walked.

"You'll get used to these walks," he said, his voice low enough that only she could hear. "They're not as long as they feel."

Fogpaw glanced at him, a faint smile tugging at her expression. "I'm not tired."

"I didn't say you were."

His whiskers twitched slightly, and for a moment, the cold didn't feel quite as sharp.

Suddenly, from somewhere behind them, Snowpaw called, "Quit making sappy eyes at my sister!"

Fogpaw gaped as Pinesun paused mid-step, quickly ducking his head to lick his chest fur.

"Snowpaw, how about *you* quit before I shove my tail in your mouth," Nettlepaw sniped, waving her fluffy tail straight into his face before winking at Fogpaw and Pinesun.

Nettlepaw's tail dropped as Snowpaw sputtered in protest, and for a moment, the tension broke into quiet laughter between them.

Up ahead, the trees began to thin, and the distant murmur of voices carried through the cold air. Fogpaw's nose crinkled as the scent of the other Clans grew stronger with every step.

By the time they reached Fourtrees, the clearing was already beginning to fill.

Cats from every Clan gathered beneath the great oaks, their scents mixing in the crisp night air—ThunderClan, WindClan, RiverClan. The Great Rock rose at the center, illuminated faintly by the moonlight above, casting long shadows across the clearing.

Fogpaw's paws slowed as she took it all in.

There were so many cats.

More than she had ever seen in one place before.

She stayed close to her Clan as they entered, her gaze flicking curiously between the others. ThunderClan cats clustered near one side of the clearing, their pelts catching the light in flashes of silver and gold. WindClan lingered a little farther off, their lean forms restless even in stillness.

And then—

RiverClan.

Fogpaw's gaze lingered there for just a moment longer.

Snowpaw had stopped walking.

Fogpaw noticed it almost immediately.

He stood a short distance behind her now, his attention fixed across the clearing. Following his gaze, Fogpaw caught sight of a pale shape among the RiverClan cats—a white tom with striking blue eyes.

The two of them didn't speak.

Didn't move.

But something passed between them all the same—something quiet, something unreadable.

Fogpaw's ears twitched slightly.

*That was strange.*

"Come on," Nettlepaw murmured, nudging her lightly.

Fogpaw blinked, turning back toward her Clan as they settled into place—

—but Nettlepaw didn't stop.

"Let's meet some cats," she added, her eyes bright with curiosity. "I want to see if RiverClan cats are as feather-brained as everyone says."

Before Fogpaw could protest, Nettlepaw was already slipping away from the ShadowClan group.

"Nettlepaw—" Fogpaw hissed under her breath, glancing back once before hurrying after her.

Snowpaw followed a moment later, quieter but just as curious.

They didn't have to go far.

Two RiverClan apprentices stood near the edge of the clearing, speaking softly to each other. As Nettlepaw approached, they both turned, their attention shifting immediately toward the ShadowClan cats.

For a moment, no one spoke.

Fogpaw's gaze darted between them.

The first was a grey-and-white tom, his face split cleanly down the middle—one half dark, the other pale, his amber eyes sharp against

the contrast. The second, a calico she-cat, had a jagged line of color between her ears, orange and black dividing unevenly across her head.

Something about them—

Fogpaw stilled slightly.

*They look...*

"Hi," Nettlepaw said brightly, as if approaching cats from another Clan was the most natural thing in the world. "You're RiverClan, right?"

The calico she-cat blinked, then nodded. "Yeah. I'm Emberpaw."

"And I'm Echopaw," the tom added, his voice calm but curious as he studied them in return. "You're from ShadowClan?"

Fogpaw dipped her head slightly. "Fogpaw."

"Nettlepaw," Nettlepaw chimed in.

Snowpaw hesitated for a heartbeat before adding, "Snowpaw."

Echopaw's gaze lingered on Fogpaw for just a moment longer than the others.

"You kind of look like us," he said suddenly.

Fogpaw blinked. "What?"

Emberpaw tilted her head, studying her more closely now. "Not exactly," she said, "but... your face. It's different."

Fogpaw shifted slightly under their attention, suddenly aware of the way her pale tortoiseshell fur lay, of the uneven blend of colors that marked her face.

"I guess," she murmured.

*That's... a strange thing to say.*

"Well, you don't seem feather-brained," Nettlepaw added, sounding almost disappointed.

Emberpaw let out a small huff of amusement. "Neither do you."

For a brief moment, the tension between Clans felt... lighter.

Almost normal.

"Come on," Snowpaw muttered quietly, glancing back toward the Great Rock as the leaders began to gather. "It's starting."

Fogpaw nodded, though her gaze lingered for just a second longer on Echopaw and Emberpaw before she turned away.

Darkstar leapt onto the Great Rock, joined by the other leaders—Dawnstar, Fernstar, and Redstar. For a moment, the clearing fell completely silent, the usual murmurs fading as all eyes turned upward.

Dawnstar stepped forward first.

"There is something that must be shared," she began, her golden pelt glowing faintly beneath the moonlight. "A message from StarClan."

A ripple of unease passed through the clearing.

Fogpaw's ears pricked forward.

"Goldenleaf received a vision," Dawnstar continued. "A vision of warriors long lost—of a gorge filled with cats, their voices unheard, their presence forgotten."

Murmurs broke out among the Clans.

Fogpaw felt her chest tighten, a quiet tension settling beneath her ribs as Nettlepaw let out a soft, startled gasp and Snowpaw went rigid beside her.

*A gorge.*

Fernstar stepped forward next. "ThunderClan's medicine cat received the same message," he said. "As did WindClan."

Redstar nodded once in agreement. "StarClan is not speaking to one Clan alone. This concerns all of us."

Fogpaw's gaze shot instinctively toward Seedspring below. He stood still, his expression unreadable, but there was something about the way he held himself, like he already knew.

"The message is clear," Dawnstar went on. "We are to find these 'lost warriors.' And bring them back."

The clearing erupted into noise.

"What warriors?"
"Where are they?"
"Why now?"

"They are SkyClan," a ThunderClan warrior yowled. "They must be."

"The gorge—of course," another added. "That's where they were driven out."

Darkstar's voice cut through the rising noise.

"Assumptions will get us nowhere," he said, his tone firm. "We do not know that this vision refers to SkyClan. We only know what StarClan has shown."

Dawnstar's gaze sharpened slightly. "And what else would it be?" she countered. "The gorge is not a coincidence."

"It could be," Darkstar replied. "StarClan's messages are not always as straightforward as we want them to be."

A low murmur spread through the Clans again.

"Whether it is SkyClan or not," Fernstar interjected, "StarClan has spoken. We cannot ignore that."

Redstar gave a short nod. "Agreed. The question is not whether we

act—but how."

"We should send a patrol," one of the WindClan warriors called. "A group from each Clan."

"Two or three cats," another added. "Enough to travel safely."

Dawnstar's tail twitched once. "RiverClan cannot spare that many," she said. "Prey has been scarce. We will send one."

Fogpaw tilted her head.

Something about that didn't feel quite right.

Darkstar narrowed his eyes slightly but said nothing.

After a moment, he spoke again. "ShadowClan will send two," he said. "Cats who can travel quickly and think clearly."

Fernstar nodded. "ThunderClan will do the same."

"And WindClan," Redstar added.

The decision settled over the clearing, not with certainty—but with agreement.

Fogpaw barely heard the rest.

Her thoughts had already begun to shift, something pulling quietly at the edges of her mind.

A message from StarClan.

A journey.

A chance to find something that had been lost.

Her gaze fixed on Seedspring again... then, without meaning to, she thought about where Splitstar would be, back in the medicine cat den.

*If StarClan is guiding this...*

The thought came slowly and carefully.

*Then maybe...*

Her chest tightened.

*Maybe this could help her.*

Fogpaw lifted her head slightly, her gaze returning to the Great Rock as the Gathering continued around her.

The decision had already been made.

The Clans would send cats.

They would follow StarClan's message.

And somehow—

She had to be one of them.

# Chapter 14- Chosen Paths

The forest felt quieter on the way back.

The sharp energy of the Gathering had faded behind them, leaving only the steady rhythm of pawsteps against frost-hardened ground and the occasional murmur of voices drifting through the cold night air. The full moon still hung high above, casting pale light through the bare branches, but it no longer felt as bright as it had before.

Fogpaw padded alongside her Clan, her thoughts lingering on everything she had seen—everything she had heard.

The Gathering had not ended in chaos, but it hadn't quite ended in peace either.

It had ended in agreement, reluctant and uneasy, but real.

The Clans would meet again at the next half-moon. Two weeks. Then the patrol would leave.

Fogpaw's ears flicked as she walked, recalling the way the leaders had spoken after the initial tension settled. Fernstar had stepped forward at one point, his voice carrying easily across the clearing as he announced ThunderClan's newest apprentices—Ashpaw, Wrenpaw, and Dovepaw. A ripple of approval had passed through the Clans, soft congratulations rising from the crowd.

Not long after, Redstar had spoken as well, his tone lighter as he shared news of WindClan's newest litter—kits born to Heathersong and Mudfall. Even in the middle of uncertainty, life continued. New beginnings pressed forward, steady and certain, no matter what StarClan had in store.

And then—

Darkstar.

Fogpaw felt her chest warm slightly at the memory.

He had called her name.

Fogpaw. Snowpaw. Nettlepaw.

Standing there beneath the full moon, with all four Clans watching, she had felt something shift inside her—something proud, something solid. The murmured congratulations from the other Clans had washed over her, unfamiliar but welcome all the same.

For a moment, she hadn't just been another apprentice.

She had been seen.

Now, as they neared camp, the quiet began to break.

"So," Tigerflare's voice cut through the air ahead of them, his tone edged with curiosity, "you really think it's SkyClan?"

Brokenmask gave a low shrug as he padded beside him. "What else would it be? A gorge full of lost warriors? It lines up too well."

"To line up perfectly is to be misleading," Vineclaw muttered from nearby, his gaze fixed ahead. "StarClan doesn't hand out answers that easily."

Toadpounce flicked her tail thoughtfully. "Still," she said, "if there's even a chance it's SkyClan... we can't ignore that."

"And who exactly is going to go looking?" Lightfeather added. "It's not exactly a short walk."

"I'd go," Nightrush said without hesitation.

Crystalfall glanced at him, amused. "You'd go anywhere if it meant getting out of camp duties."

"That's not true," he shot back. "I'd go because it matters."

"I've traveled near the gorge before," Vineclaw added after a moment. "I know the terrain."

"Then you should go," Brokenmask mewed.

"And leave the Clan short a warrior?" Flowerdew countered gently. "We have to think about what we're risking, not just what we might gain."

Bonerun, walking just ahead with Darkstar, gave a quiet snort. "Half of you are volunteering like this is some kind of competition," he said, glancing back over his shoulder. "This isn't about who *wants* to go. It's about who *should*."

"That's easy for you to say," Nightrush replied. "You're not the one missing out."

Bonerun's tail flicked once. "Missing out on what? Freezing nights, unknown territory, and whatever StarClan decided not to explain clearly?" His voice wasn't harsh—but it carried weight. "This isn't a patrol. It's a responsibility."

Driftswipe, who had been quiet until now, spoke from just behind them. "Responsibility or not," she said, her tone thoughtful, "we can't ignore it either. If StarClan is reaching this far... something is wrong."

Fogpaw's ears twitched slightly at her mother's voice.

"There's always something wrong," Tigerflare muttered.

"Not like this," Driftswipe replied, her gaze steady. "Not across all four Clans at once."

Moongaze, padding slightly apart from the others, finally spoke, his voice quieter but no less firm. "If StarClan is asking for this," he said, "then whoever goes will need more than just strength."

A few cats glanced toward him.

"They'll need to think clearly," he continued. "To question what they're seeing, not just accept it."

Vineclaw gave a small nod. "Agreed."

The conversation shifted again after that, quieter but no less intense.

Every cat had an opinion.

Every cat had a reason.

"I think it would be exciting," Nettlepaw whispered beside Fogpaw, her eyes bright despite the cold. "A real journey, not just patrols and training."

Snowpaw let out a quiet huff. "It's not supposed to be exciting," he said. "It's dangerous."

"That doesn't mean it can't be both," Nettlepaw shot back.

Fogpaw glanced between them, then toward Pinesun, who had fallen into step just ahead.

"What do you think?" she asked.

Pinesun slowed slightly, glancing back at her. For a moment, he didn't answer right away.

"I think," he said carefully, "if StarClan is telling us to go... then it's probably important. But that doesn't mean they're telling us everything."

Fogpaw's ears twitched.

That felt... right.

They reached camp not long after, the familiar scent of ShadowClan wrapping around them as they passed through the entrance. The cold seemed to settle deeper here, the clearing dim beneath the fading moonlight as cats began to disperse, their conversations continuing in quieter clusters.

Fogpaw lingered for a moment.

Then, without fully thinking it through, she turned toward the medicine cat den.

Seedspring was already inside, looking over the herb stock, while Mintbreeze was nowhere to be seen. His scent still lingered strongly

throughout the den, and Fogpaw guessed he must be resting in his nest further back, out of sight.

Seedspring looked up as she entered, his amber eyes calm but attentive as always. "Your paw holding up?" he asked.

"It's fine," Fogpaw said quickly.

She hesitated near the entrance, her tail curling slightly around her paws.

For a moment, she almost left.

"I've been having dreams."

The words came out before she could stop them.

Seedspring stilled.

Fogpaw swallowed, stepping a little closer. "Not normal ones," she added. "They feel... real. Like I'm actually there."

She glanced briefly toward where Splitstar lay, still and silent as ever.

"I've seen the ravine," she continued, her voice quieter now. "Or something like it. And... her."

Seedspring didn't interrupt.

Didn't question.

He just listened.

"She's trying to tell me something," Fogpaw mewed, her chest tightening slightly. "I don't understand it yet, but I know it matters. It has to."

Her gaze flicked back to him.

"And now StarClan is telling us to find something that's been lost," she added. "To go on a journey."

She took a small breath.

"I think it's connected."

Seedspring studied her for a long moment. "Dreams aren't always clear at first," he said slowly. "Sometimes they come in pieces."

Fogpaw nodded quickly. "That's what this feels like."

Silence settled between them again.

"I want to go," Fogpaw mumbled finally.

The words felt heavier spoken aloud.

More real.

"I think I'm supposed to."

Seedspring's gaze softened slightly, though his expression remained reflective. "If what you're seeing is truly connected to StarClan..." he began, then paused. "Then it would make sense that you're part of this."

Fogpaw's chest tightened again—this time with something closer to hope.

"But that decision isn't mine to make," he added gently. "It's Darkstar's."

Fogpaw nodded again, her hopeful feeling faltering slightly. "I know."

Still—

She didn't look away.

"I'm going to ask him," she declared.

Seedspring mused for a heartbeat, his gaze thoughtful. "...Then I think you should," he said quietly. "If StarClan is reaching you, Darkstar deserves to know."

Fogpaw's ears twitched slightly.

"And if he asks," Seedspring added, "I won't tell him to ignore it."

Fogpaw dipped her head. "Thank you," she murmured.

Outside, the camp had quieted, but the tension hadn't faded. If anything, it had only just begun.

# Chapter 15- No Turning Back

The camp was still when Fogpaw stepped out into the clearing.

Morning had only just begun to touch the forest beyond the camp walls, pale light filtering weakly through the bare branches as leaf-bare clung stubbornly to its final days. Most of the Clan had not yet fully stirred, the air quiet save for the occasional rustle of movement from the warriors' den.

Fogpaw paused for a moment, her breath misting faintly in front of her.

Her heart was already racing.

*You said you were going to ask him.*

She drew in a slow breath, steadying herself.

Then she crossed the clearing.

Darkstar sat near the base of the Highrock, his dark grey pelt barely distinguishable from the shadow behind him. Bonerun stood at his side, speaking in low tones, but both fell silent as Fogpaw approached.

She stopped a few tail-lengths away and dipped her head respectfully.

"Darkstar," she began, her voice steady despite the pounding in her chest. "I need to speak with you."

His yellow eyes rested on her, unreadable. "Go on."

Fogpaw swallowed. "I want to go on the SkyClan patrol."

The words felt heavier spoken aloud than they had in her thoughts.

Bonerun's ears flicked sharply.

Darkstar didn't react immediately.

"You're an apprentice," he mewed after a moment.

Fogpaw held her ground. "I know," she replied. "But this isn't just about the patrol."

She hesitated only for a heartbeat before continuing.

"I've been having dreams," she stated. "Not normal ones. They feel real—like I'm actually there. I've seen the ravine... and I've seen Splitstar."

Bonerun shifted slightly beside Darkstar, his expression tightening.

Fogpaw pressed on. "She's not gone," she said, her voice quieter now. "She's still there. And she's trying to tell me something."

Silence settled over the clearing.

Darkstar's gaze sharpened.

"And you believe this has something to do with StarClan's message?" he asked.

"Yes," Fogpaw mewed without hesitation. "I don't understand it yet—but I know it's connected. And I think... I think I'm supposed to go."

Darkstar's tail flicked once.

"This is not a training exercise," he said, his voice firm. "This patrol will be dangerous. Unknown territory. Unknown outcome."

"I understand," Fogpaw replied, her voice steady despite the tightening in her chest. "But if StarClan is trying to show me something—if Splitstar is—then we can't ignore it."

"You could be mistaken," Bonerun cut in, his tone sharp. "Dreams are not always what they seem."

Fogpaw's ears dipped slightly, but she didn't back down.

"They don't feel like dreams," she said quietly. "They feel like... something reaching back."

A new voice spoke from behind her.

"She's not guessing."

Fogpaw turned as Seedspring stepped forward from the edge of the clearing, his amber eyes calm but certain.

"StarClan is reaching her," he continued. "I've felt it too. Not in the same way, but enough to know this isn't random."

He glanced briefly at Darkstar.

"If we ignore that," he added, "we may miss something important."

Darkstar didn't respond right away. His gaze shifted between them, thoughtful now rather than dismissive.

Fogpaw held her breath.

"If what you're saying is true," he said slowly, "then this is more than coincidence."

His eyes settled on Fogpaw again.

"ShadowClan apprentices are usually tested on their journey to the Moonstone," he continued. "They travel with a partner and prove how far their training has come."

Fogpaw's ears pricked slightly.

"This *quest*," Darkstar went on, glancing briefly toward the forest beyond camp, "may serve the same purpose for you."

Fogpaw's chest tightened.

Hope—sharp and sudden—flared within her.

"You will not go alone," Darkstar mewed, his voice firm, leaving no room for argument. "If you are to go on this patrol, you will need a cat who is a warrior—someone capable, and someone you work

well with."

Fogpaw nodded quickly. "Of course."

Darkstar's gaze shifted past her, toward the warriors' den where movement had just begun to stir.

"Pinesun."

Fogpaw turned as the brown tabby tom emerged from the warriors' den, his pelt still slightly ruffled from sleep. He paused at the entrance, ears flicking as his name carried across the clearing, then straightened and made his way forward at once. His steps were steady, unhurried, though his eyes sharpened with quiet focus as he approached.

He stopped before Darkstar, dipping his head respectfully.

"You called?"

"Yes," Darkstar replied, his gaze steady. "The patrol we discussed at the Gathering will leave at the next half-moon. StarClan has called for us to seek out what has been lost—and whether that means SkyClan or something else entirely, we cannot afford to ignore it."

Pinesun's ears perked forward slightly, his attention sharpening.

"This will not be a simple journey," Darkstar continued. "The patrol will be traveling beyond our territory, into places we do not know, for reasons StarClan has not fully explained. I need cats who can think clearly, adapt quickly, and rely on one another."

His eyes shifted briefly toward Fogpaw, then back to Pinesun.

"You and Fogpaw have already proven you work well together. That matters more than strength alone. Will you accompany her on this quest?"

Pinesun dipped his head without hesitation. "It would be my honor."

Fogpaw felt something steady settle in her chest at his presence.

"And Seedspring will go as well," Darkstar added.

Bonerun's whiskers twitched. "A medicine cat?"

"This patrol may require one," Darkstar replied. "And if Fogpaw's connection to StarClan is as significant as it seems... she may need guidance. ShadowClan is fortunate to have more than one medicine cat, so we can afford to send one without leaving the Clan unprotected."

Seedspring gave a small nod. "I'll go."

The decision settled over the clearing.

Final.

Fogpaw exhaled slowly.

*I'm going.*

The rest of the camp began to stir not long after, word spreading quickly despite the early hour. Fogpaw barely had time to think before she found Nettlepaw and Snowpaw near the apprentice den, their expressions already questioning.

"Well?" Nettlepaw demanded. "What happened?"

Fogpaw hesitated, her gaze sweeping between them.

"I'm going on the patrol," she murmured. "The one to find SkyClan."

Nettlepaw blinked. "What?"

Snowpaw's ears flicked sharply, his gaze snapping to hers. "Why you?"

Fogpaw swallowed, steadying herself. Then she told them everything—the dreams, the ravine, Splitstar.

Nettlepaw's eyes widened slightly, her usual confidence giving way to something more serious.

"You didn't tell us before," she mewed.

"I didn't know if it was real," Fogpaw admitted.

Snowpaw was quiet, almost too quiet.

"And now you're going because of this?" Nettlepaw asked.

Fogpaw nodded. "I think I have to."

A brief silence passed between them.

Nettlepaw shifted her paws, glancing between them before straightening slightly. "...Then we'll help you," she said finally, her voice firm. "If you're going out there, we'll watch from here."

Snowpaw's gaze flickered, something unreadable passing through his expression as he looked at Fogpaw.

"...If something doesn't feel right," he added quietly, "we'll take care of it."

Fogpaw felt a small buzz of relief.

"Thank you."

Talking to her parents was harder. They weren't pleased—Bonerun especially—but neither of them could deny what StarClan was asking. In the end, their resistance softened into reluctant acceptance, tempered by concern they couldn't quite conceal.

Fogpaw carried that with her afterward. Not just their concern, but the weight of it—the way they had looked at her, like she was already stepping into something they couldn't follow. It settled deep in her chest, heavier than she expected. But beneath it, steadier than the doubt, was resolve.

The last cat she needed to tell was Moongaze.

Fogpaw spotted him near the edge of camp, his pale silver pelt catching the faint morning light as he stood just beyond the clearing. He wasn't doing anything in particular—just standing there, his gaze fixed somewhere far beyond the trees, as if he were looking for something that wasn't there.

Or someone.

Fogpaw slowed as she approached, her paws suddenly feeling heavier against the cold ground.

*This is different.*

Telling Nettlepaw had been easy. Snowpaw... complicated. Her parents, hard, but expected.

This—

This felt like stepping into a bramble bush.

*He's been waiting for her to wake up for moons.*

Her chest tightened.

*And I'm about to tell him she 's trying .*

She hesitated, just outside of earshot, her tail curling slightly around her paws.

*What if I'm wrong?*

The thought came sharp and sudden.

*What if I give him hope... and it isn't real?*

Fogpaw swallowed, forcing herself forward.

"Moongaze?"

He turned at once, as if he had already been half-aware of her presence. His amber eyes softened when he saw her, though the distant look didn't fully leave them.

"Fogpaw," he greeted. "What is it?"

Fogpaw hesitated for a heartbeat.

Then another.

Her throat felt tight.

"I'm going on the quest," she stated finally.

Something shifted in his expression—not surprise, exactly, but deeper. This time, there was no distance in him, only focus.

She took a small step closer, steadying herself.

"And I think... I think I know why."

He didn't interrupt, but something in his posture changed, like he was bracing himself.

"I've been dreaming," Fogpaw mewed, her voice quiet. "Not normal dreams. They feel... real. Like I'm actually there."

She swallowed.

"The ravine," she continued. "And—"

Her gaze dropped briefly to the ground.

"Splitstar."

Moongaze froze. His breath seemed to catch, just for a moment, his attention sharpening as if the words had pulled him fully back into the present.

"I've seen her," Fogpaw went on, her voice soft but steadier. "Not clearly, not all at once, but she's there. In the ravine, or something like it."

She lifted her gaze to meet his.

"She's not gone."

The words settled between them, heavy, like the first snowfall of leaf-bare.

Moongaze didn't speak or move. But Fogpaw saw it—the slight tightening of his jaw, the way his gaze flickered, as if something inside him had shifted too quickly to process.

"Not like everyone thinks," Fogpaw added, quieter now. "She's... still there. Somewhere in between."

Silence stretched, longer this time.

*Did I say the wrong thing?*

She shuffled her paws slightly, uncertainty creeping in.

*Did I just make it worse?*

Then—

Moongaze exhaled slowly, like he had been holding that breath for far longer than just this moment.

"...You're sure?" he asked.

His voice was quieter than she had ever heard, edged with a fragility she couldn't quite name.

Fogpaw nodded.

"I've seen her," she said. "She's trying to tell me something. I don't understand it yet, but I will with time."

Moongaze dropped his head briefly, then lifted again, settling on her with a kind of intensity that hadn't been there before. For the first time since she had known him, he looked hopeful.

"...Then go," he whispered.

Fogpaw blinked, caught off guard by how quickly the words came.

"Find what she's trying to show you," he continued, his voice still quiet, but stronger now. "Whatever it is... it matters. If she's reaching you, then there's a reason."

He paused, his gaze softening just slightly.

"And if there's even a chance—" he began, then stopped himself, his voice faltering.

Fogpaw didn't need him to finish.

"—I'll find it," she murmured softly.

Moongaze held her gaze for a moment longer, then gave a small nod.

"And come back," he warned.

Fogpaw dipped her head. "I will."

As she stepped away, the camp no longer felt quite the same. There was a shift, not just in Moongaze, but in everything.

Hope had been fragile before, but now, it had something to hold onto.

The path ahead had been chosen, and there was no turning back now.

# Chapter 16- Where the Thaw Begins

Some time had passed since Fogpaw had spoken to Darkstar—since it had been decided which cats would go on the quest.

The forest no longer felt as still as it had before.

As she padded alongside Nettlepaw, the change was subtle, but unmistakable. The ground was no longer frozen solid beneath her paws, the soil softening just enough to give with each step. Here and there, faint green shoots pushed through the thinning frost, stubborn and small but alive all the same.

Newleaf was beginning.

Fogpaw lifted her head slightly, drawing in a breath of the cool air. It still held the sharp bite of leaf-bare, but there was something lighter beneath it now—a faint warmth carried on a breeze that hadn't been there before.

*Everything's changing.*

Behind her, Flowerdew and Moongaze followed at an easy pace, their voices low as they spoke between themselves. Nettlepaw walked at Fogpaw's side, her tail flicking with restless energy as she scanned the undergrowth.

"I'm telling you," Nettlepaw muttered, "if I catch another piece of bark instead of prey, I'm going back to camp."

Fogpaw let out a soft huff of amusement. "Maybe try looking before you pounce this time."

"I do look," Nettlepaw shot back, though her whiskers twitched. "The prey just chooses to vanish!"

Moongaze's voice drifted forward, calm and even. "Prey won't

vanish if you move more quickly."

Nettlepaw rolled her eyes but dipped her head slightly. "Yes, Moongaze."

They spread out not long after, slipping into the familiar rhythm of a hunting patrol.

Fogpaw slowed her steps, lowering herself instinctively as she moved through a patch of sparse undergrowth. Her ears flicked forward, catching the faint rustle ahead—small, quick.

Mouse.

She stilled.

The breeze shifted gently against her fur, carrying her scent away instead of toward it.

*Good.*

Carefully, she crept forward, placing each paw with deliberate precision. No snapping twigs. No unnecessary movement. Her body lowered closer to the ground as she drew nearer, every muscle focused.

The mouse nibbled at something beneath the roots of a shrub, unaware.

Fogpaw gathered herself, and sprang, her paws landing cleanly.

The mouse barely had time to react before it went still.

Fogpaw straightened, her chest rising slightly as she looked down at her catch.

*That was... easy.*

"Nice catch."

Fogpaw glanced up.

Flowerdew had approached quietly, her pale blue eyes warm with

approval.

"You've improved," she added. "A lot."

Fogpaw dipped her head, a flicker of pride warming her chest.

"Thanks."

From a few fox-lengths away, Nettlepaw called, "Of course she has —she's been showing me up all morning!"

Fogpaw purred lightly. "Maybe keep up, then."

Behind Flowerdew, Moongaze had paused, his amber gaze resting briefly on Fogpaw's catch. He gave a small nod, subtle, but enough.

"Good form," he said. "You didn't rush."

The praise settled deeper than she expected.

Flowerdew stepped a little closer to Moongaze then, her tone light. "You're turning into quite the mentor, you know."

Moongaze's ears flicked slightly, though his expression didn't change much. "They're learning."

She tilted her head, a faint smile tugging at her expression. "Still. Not every apprentice picks things up this quickly."

Moongaze shifted his weight, his gaze moving away from her, back toward the trees.

"They're working for it," he mewed simply.

Fogpaw watched the exchange briefly.

Something about it felt... off. Not *wrong*, exactly, just not meant to be.

Before she could think on it further, movement caught her eye. Two figures approached through the trees.

Pinesun.

And—

Duskpelt.

Fogpaw's ears pricked slightly as they drew closer. Pinesun's dark brown pelt stood out against the fading frost, his lighter stripes shining under the pale sun, his posture relaxed but purposeful. Beside him, Duskpelt moved with a smooth, easy stride, her silver-dappled fur catching what little light filtered through the trees.

"Mind if we join you?" Pinesun called.

Flowerdew turned, her expression brightening. "Not at all! More paws, more prey."

Duskpelt stepped forward, her pale green eyes flicking briefly toward the other cats before settling on Pinesun again.

"Well," she mewed lightly, "I suppose I won't have to carry you through the patrol alone now."

Pinesun let out a soft huff, his whiskers twitching. "I think I manage just fine."

Fogpaw watched as the pretty she-cat brushed lightly past him, her tail flicking in a way that felt almost... deliberate.

Something tightened in her chest.

*Oh.*

She looked away quickly, lowering her head as if scanning for prey again.

*Why do I care?*

But her ears still perked toward them, listening.

"...you were a little slow on that last patrol," Duskpelt was saying, her tone teasing.

"Are you sure about that?" Pinesun retorted, though there was a

hint of amusement in his voice now. "I can show you just how fast I can be."

Fogpaw's paws pressed slightly harder into the ground.

*He doesn't sound annoyed.*

A rustle nearby snapped her attention forward again.

A vole.

This time, she didn't hesitate.

She moved faster, sharper—her body dropping low, steps quicker than before. The vole darted, sensing movement, but Fogpaw adjusted instantly, cutting it off before it could reach cover.

She lunged—

And caught it cleanly.

Her breath came a little faster this time.

"*Another* one?" Nettlepaw called, impressed. "Alright, now you're definitely showing off."

Fogpaw lifted her head slightly, trying to keep her expression neutral.

"Not at all."

"Well, it *is* just a vole," Duskpelt mewed from behind them, her voice light but edged. "They're hardly a challenge."

Her gaze lingered on Fogpaw for a heartbeat—cool, assessing—before shifting back to Pinesun as if the comment hadn't meant anything at all.

Fogpaw's ears twitched slightly, the warmth of her earlier pride dulling just a fraction.

*It was a clean catch.*

She resisted the urge to say it aloud. Instead, she simply dipped her head again, setting the vole down with deliberate care.

"But I suppose it's easier when you're trying to prove something," Duskpelt added, her gaze settling more directly on Fogpaw now.

Fogpaw stilled.

Pinesun straightened slightly, his attention sharpening, though he didn't interrupt.

"What do you mean?" Nettlepaw cut in, her tone already sharpening.

Duskpelt shrugged, though her eyes didn't leave Fogpaw. "Nothing. Just... interesting timing."

Pinesun took a half-step forward, his voice low but firm. "Duskpelt —"

"An apprentice suddenly being chosen for a quest? Because of dreams?" She gave a small, humorless huff. "Sounds more like attention-seeking than anything StarClan would actually care about."

Fogpaw's chest tightened.

*That's not—*

Flowerdew's ears flattened slightly. "That's not fair," she murmured, though her voice stayed measured.

"And honestly," Duskpelt went on, quieter now but sharper, "I'd be careful if I were you. Cats who think they're special usually end up getting themselves—or others—hurt."

Her gaze flicked briefly to Fogpaw's face.

"That, or they're just trying to stand out."

The words landed harder than they should have.

Fogpaw's breath hitched.

*I'm not—*

Heat rushed to her face, her paws suddenly feeling unsteady beneath her. The forest seemed to shift around her, the sounds dulling, distant.

"I'm not trying to—" she started, but the words felt stuck, tangled.

Duskpelt didn't wait.

"Then what are you doing?" she pressed. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you're chasing something you don't understand."

Nettlepaw stepped forward, her plumy tail lashing. "She doesn't have to explain anything to you."

Fogpaw's chest tightened further.

Her breathing felt wrong now—too fast, too shallow.

*Why can't I—*

"I think that's enough," Moongaze snapped, his fur bristling.

But Fogpaw barely heard him.

The forest felt too close.

She hesitated for a heartbeat—

Then turned and pushed quickly through the undergrowth, not quite running, but not slowing either.

"Fogpaw—!" Nettlepaw called after her.

...

Branches brushed against her sides as she moved, her paws carrying her farther from the patrol without thinking. Her breath came quicker than usual, uneven—not out of fear, but frustration, the

words still echoing in her mind.

*I'm not doing this for attention.*

*I didn't ask for this.*

She slowed after a few moments, her pace faltering as she reached a cluster of rocks near the edge of the territory. The forest was quieter here, the air cooler, tinged with the faint scent of thawing earth.

Fogpaw stopped, drawing in a breath—then another—trying to steady herself.

*Why does it bother me so much?*

Her claws pressed lightly into the ground as she focused on something solid—the cold beneath her paws, the distant rustle of wind through bare branches, the faint signs of newleaf pushing through the frost.

"Fogpaw."

Nettlepaw's voice—closer now.

Fogpaw didn't turn right away.

Nettlepaw approached more slowly this time, her earlier sharpness gone, replaced with something more steady. She stopped beside her with a small huff.

"She's wrong," Nettlepaw mewed simply.

Fogpaw let out a quiet breath.

"I know," she murmured.

But it didn't come out as certain as she wanted.

Nettlepaw flicked her tail. "She's just jealous," she added. "Everyone knows Pinesun is practically head over paws for you."

Fogpaw blinked, caught off guard.

"That's not—" she started, then stopped, her ears warming slightly. "That's not why."

Nettlepaw gave her a sideways look. "Oh, please."

Fogpaw looked away, her gaze dropping to the ground.

"...It's not my fault," she muttered quietly. "That I look like this. Like *her*."

The words slipped out before she could stop them. Heat crept beneath her fur as she became suddenly, painfully aware of her own face—the split in her pelt, one side pale cream, the other dark grey. It wasn't as stark as Splitstar's, not as striking, but it was close enough that others noticed. Close enough that *she* noticed.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Nettlepaw's expression softened just a fraction.

"Duskpelt didn't mean that," she mewed after a heartbeat. "Not really. She just... doesn't get it."

Fogpaw's chest tightened again, but softer this time. Less sharp. Easier to breathe through.

"It just—" Fogpaw swallowed. "It felt like she meant it."

Nettlepaw flicked her tail. "She doesn't know what she's talking about."

A pause.

"...And she doesn't get to decide what StarClan wants."

Fogpaw let out a slow breath.

This one steadier.

"...Okay," she said quietly.

After a moment, Nettlepaw nudged her lightly. "Come on. Let's not give her the satisfaction of you disappearing."

Fogpaw hesitated, then nodded.

...

When they returned, the patrol had gone quiet.

Pinesun's head lifted immediately when he saw her, his gaze sharpening with concern.

"Are you alright?" he asked, stepping slightly forward.

Fogpaw dipped her head quickly. "I'm fine."

He didn't look convinced.

Duskpelt stood off to the side, her posture more rigid than before, her gaze avoiding Fogpaw's.

For a moment, no one spoke.

Then, quietly—

"...I didn't mean for it to go that far," she muttered.

It wasn't quite an apology, but it was close enough.

Fogpaw gave a small nod.

"It's fine," she repeated.

Moongaze's amber eyes lingered on her for a moment longer than usual before his voice broke through the silence. "We're heading back. The prey is moving more than it has been—we've done enough for one patrol."

The group began to gather their catches, the forest around them no longer quite as cold, no longer quite as still.

As Fogpaw turned back toward camp, her gaze drifted briefly to the small green shoots pushing through the thawing ground.

*Newleaf is coming.*

And with it—

Everything was about to change.

# Chapter 17- A Cold Kind of Trust

Since the Gathering, things had changed.

The prophecy had spread quickly through all four Clans, whispered between patrols and shared in low voices around the camp. And not long after, Snowpaw and Freezingpaw had agreed—without saying much—that meeting every half-moon was no longer enough.

So, Snowpaw moved carefully between the trees under the waning moon, his paws barely making a sound against the damp, thawing ground. Leaf-bare still clung to the air, but it was weakening now—softened by the slow return of newleaf. The wind no longer cut as sharply, though it still carried a chill that settled beneath his fur. He didn't mind it. It kept him alert.

He slipped through ShadowClan territory with practiced ease, keeping low where the undergrowth allowed it, ears pricked for any sign of movement. The familiar scents of camp faded behind him the farther he went, replaced by the colder, emptier stillness of the forest at night. When the sharp, bitter scent of the thunderpath reached him, he slowed.

The ground changed first—harder, darker. The trees thinned. Snowpaw crouched near the edge of the undergrowth, peering out toward the stretch of black stone. No monsters passed, but the lingering scent of them hung thick in the air.

He waited anyway.

Then, when the forest held still, he darted across.

The stone was cold beneath his paws, unfamiliar and wrong, but he didn't hesitate. He crossed quickly and slipped back into the trees on the other side, the scent of ShadowClan now faint behind him.

Fourtrees wasn't far.

The great oaks loomed ahead, their bare branches stretching wide against the dark sky. Even in the quiet of night, the place felt different—heavy with memory, with voices that no longer echoed there. Snowpaw didn't stop. He skirted the edge of the clearing, keeping to the shadows, his pace steady.

Only when he had passed it did he slow again.

The air shifted.

*RiverClan.*

It came gradually—cooler, sharper, tinged with water and reeds. Snowpaw lifted his head slightly, scanning the trees ahead as he crossed the final stretch of unfamiliar ground.

He didn't have to wait long.

Freezingpaw stepped out from the shadows as if he had always been there.

"You're late," he mewed, though there was no real bite to it.

Snowpaw waved his tail. "I had to make sure I wasn't followed."

Freezingpaw studied him for a moment, then gave a small nod. "Good."

They stood a few tail-lengths apart at first—not as far as before, but not close enough to be uncomfortable either. Snowpaw shifted his weight slightly, his gaze dropping for a moment before lifting again.

"Darkstar has chosen who's going," he said.

Freezingpaw's ears pricked forward. "Who?"

"Fogpaw," Snowpaw replied. "Pinesun... and Seedspring."

Freezingpaw blinked once. "A medicine cat?" he repeated, a hint of surprise breaking through his usual calm. "That's... unusual."

Snowpaw let out a quiet huff. "That's what I thought."

A brief silence passed between them.

"Dawnstar hasn't decided yet," Freezingpaw said after a moment. "Or if she has, she hasn't told us."

Snowpaw nodded slightly, though his thoughts had already begun to drift.

*Fogpaw.*

The name lingered longer than it should have.

He could still picture the way the Clan had reacted—how easily it had been decided. How *no one* had questioned it.

*Of course she's going.*

His claws pressed lightly into the ground.

*Because she's* special.

The thought came sharp, uninvited.

Fogpaw had the dreams. Fogpaw had the connection. Fogpaw had something none of the rest of them did—and everyone believed it without hesitation.

Snowpaw's jaw tightened slightly.

*What about me?*

He exhaled quietly, forcing the thought down.

It wasn't that he didn't think she deserved to go. She did. He knew she did. But still—

*I could have gone.*

*I would have done just as well.*

*Maybe better.*

The thought startled him.

Snowpaw blinked, his ears flattening slightly as he shook his head once, as if to clear it.

*That's not—*

He shifted again, something unsettled stirring in his chest. "What's the point of this?" he muttered suddenly.

Freezingpaw's gaze sharpened.

"This," Snowpaw went on, his tail flicking once. "Meeting like this. Telling you things. Watching my own Clan like I'm not part of it." He hesitated, his voice hardening slightly. "My apprenticeship was delayed because of *you* and *your* Clan. What does it actually change?"

For a moment, Freezingpaw didn't answer. Then he stepped a little closer—not enough to crowd him, but enough that the space between them felt personal.

"It keeps us from being caught off guard," he replied carefully. "If the Clans are walking into something they don't understand, someone has to be ready."

Snowpaw frowned slightly.

"That's what Dawnstar believes," Freezingpaw added. "And she's not wrong."

Snowpaw's claws pressed lightly into the ground.

*It still feels* wrong.

"You don't have to agree with it," Freezingpaw continued, his tone softer now. "But you're already part of it."

Snowpaw's gaze flicked up to meet his—and lingered. For a heartbeat longer than it should have.

Freezingpaw's pale fur caught the moonlight that filtered through

the reeds, making his pelt glow in soft speckles like the stars themselves, his blue eyes steady—clear in a way that Snowpaw wasn't used to.

*He's quite...*

Snowpaw's chest tightened.

*Why am I noticing that?*

He forced himself to look away—but not before catching the faintest shift in Freezingpaw's expression, as if he had noticed too.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

"Do you wanna know why I think you're different?" Freezingpaw mewed quietly, echoing himself from their last meeting.

Snowpaw stiffened slightly.

"I can see it," Freezingpaw went on. "You think about things. You don't just follow."

Something fluttered in Snowpaw's belly. Not unpleasant. Just... new.

"...Maybe," he mewed simply.

Freezingpaw's gaze lingered on him a moment longer than necessary. "You could do more than just follow them."

Snowpaw let out a small huff, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly despite himself. "You say that like it's easy."

Freezingpaw's whiskers twitched faintly. "Maybe it is," he replied. "You just haven't tried yet."

Snowpaw glanced back at him, a flicker of something lighter breaking through his earlier tension.

"...Or maybe you just think too highly of me."

"Maybe," Freezingpaw said, though there was something almost

teasing in his tone now. "But I don't think I'm wrong."

The words settled heavier than they should have.

*Yes.*

A voice stirred at the back of Snowpaw's mind. Stronger this time. Closer.

*Do more.*

Snowpaw's body went still. He forced his expression to remain neutral, his tail still. *Not now.*

Freezingpaw tilted his head slightly. "What is it?"

"Nothing," Snowpaw said quickly.

Freezingpaw didn't look convinced.

Snowpaw looked away, his gaze drifting toward the faint sound of water somewhere beyond the reeds. It filled the silence between them, grounding him just enough.

*Get a grip.*

"I should go," he clipped abruptly.

Freezingpaw hesitated. "...Alright," he murmured after a moment. "Same time next week?"

Snowpaw nodded. "Yeah."

He turned, already stepping back the way he came.

"Snowpaw."

He paused.

"...Take care," Freezingpaw said.

Snowpaw didn't turn around. "You too."

He made his way back through the trees, the RiverClan scent fading behind him as he retraced his steps. Past Fourtrees, where the great oaks stood silent. Across the thunderpath again, quick and careful, the cold stone barely registering beneath his paws.

*He trusts you.*

Snowpaw's ears twitched.

*He listens to you. Believes you.*

His claws pressed harder into the ground as he walked.

*You could use that.*

Snowpaw's jaw tightened. "No."

*Why not?*

The voice was smoother this time. More certain.

*If he trusts you... you can make him do what you need.*

Snowpaw's pace faltered for just a moment.

*He's useful.*

Snowpaw shook his head once, sharp, as if he could physically dislodge the thought.

"Stop," he muttered under his breath.

The forest didn't answer, but the feeling lingered.

And it followed him—

All the way back to camp.

# Chapter 18- What Wasn't Said

Over the next few days, a quiet frustration began to take root within Fogpaw.

At first, it was easy to ignore—just another feeling beneath everything else she was already carrying. The weight of the prophecy. The looming journey. The strange, restless pull of her dreams. It all blended together into something she couldn't quite name.

So she did what she always did.

She kept moving.

She followed her routine as if nothing had changed, rising with the dawn and slipping out into the forest with the others. Hunting patrols, border checks, training sessions—it all continued as it always had. Her paws learned the patterns of the forest more surely with each passing day, her movements growing sharper, more precise. Prey rarely escaped her now.

Driftswipe had even commented on it once.

"You're growing into a fine warrior," she had said, her tone warm.

Fogpaw had only dipped her head in response.

It didn't feel like improvement.

It felt like pressure.

Back in camp, she shared tongues with Nettlepaw in the weak newleaf sunlight, the two of them talking easily about nothing and everything at once. Nettlepaw's energy hadn't dimmed in the slightest, her confidence steady as ever, as if the coming journey were just another adventure to look forward to.

Snowpaw, on the other paw, remained just as quick to argue.

They bickered over prey more than once—over a squirrel, over a piece of thrush, over nothing at all. It was familiar, almost comforting in its normalcy.

But even that felt different now.

Everything did.

Moongaze pushed her harder during training, his usual quiet patience sharpened into something more focused. Every movement mattered. Every mistake was corrected. He didn't say it outright—but she knew why.

*You're leaving soon.*

The thought lingered, no matter how much she tried to push it aside.

At night, when the camp settled and the world grew still, her dreams came more often. The ravine. The hollow. That same lingering feeling of something unfinished and waiting.

*Find me.*

She woke each time with the same tightness in her chest.

And through it all—

The memory of that hunt lingered.

Duskpelt's words.

Pinesun's silence.

Fogpaw tried to let it go. She told herself it didn't matter, that she had more important things to think about. But the feeling stayed, quiet and persistent, like a thorn caught beneath her fur.

*You just stood there.*

Each time she saw him after that, the thought returned.

Until finally—

She couldn't ignore it anymore.

By the time the sun had begun to dip behind the trees that evening, painting the camp in soft gold and shadow, Fogpaw's frustration had settled into something firmer.

She rose from where she had been sitting, her paws already carrying her across the clearing before she could second-guess herself.

She knew where he would be.

And this time—

She wasn't going to stay quiet.

The camp had settled into a relaxed hum when Fogpaw found him.

Pinesun stood near the edge of the clearing, his gaze fixed somewhere beyond the camp pines, as if he were watching something only he could see. His posture was relaxed—but not fully. There was always something guarded in him.

Fogpaw hesitated for only a moment.

Then she crossed the clearing.

"Pinesun."

He turned at the sound of her voice, his expression softening almost immediately. "Hey—"

"You didn't say anything."

The words came out sharper than she meant them to.

Pinesun blinked, caught off guard. "About...?"

"The other day," Fogpaw pressed, her tail lashing once. "With Duskpelt."

Her chest tightened as the memory pushed forward again—those words, that look.

He hadn't said anything.

He hadn't even tried.

"You just stood there," she went on, her voice rising slightly despite herself. "Like it didn't matter."

Pinesun's ears flicked back slightly. "Fogpaw, I—"

"I didn't need you to fight her," she cut in, her voice wavering now, frustration bleeding into something more fragile. "But you didn't even—say anything. Not a single word."

For a moment, neither of them moved.

The air between them felt thinner somehow.

Pinesun exhaled slowly, his gaze dropping briefly to the ground before lifting back to hers.

"...I did," he mewed.

Fogpaw frowned. "What?"

"I did say something," he clarified, his voice steady but subdued. "After you left. I told her to stop—that she was out of line."

"Oh."

The word came out softer than she intended.

"I didn't just stand there," Pinesun added, not defensive, just... honest. "I just didn't say it in time for you to hear it."

For a heartbeat, Fogpaw didn't respond.

A flicker of something uneasy stirred in her chest.

*I left too soon.*

But it didn't erase what she'd felt.

"That's not—" She swallowed, her voice tightening again. "That's not

what it felt like."

Pinesun nodded. "I know."

He didn't argue it, didn't try to correct her. That almost made it worse.

"I didn't want to speak for you in the *middle* of it," he declared.

Fogpaw frowned. "What?"

"I didn't want to overstep," he continued, quieter now. "It wasn't my place to jump in like that. You can handle yourself, Fogpaw. You don't need someone else speaking over you."

Fogpaw stared at him.

"I wasn't trying to take that away from you."

Her ears flattened slightly.

"I didn't need you to speak *for* me," she mewed, softer now but no less strained. "I just... didn't want to stand there alone."

The words hung between them.

Understanding and regret shifted in his expression then.

"I see that now," he said quietly.

Fogpaw's gaze dropped for a moment, her claws pressing lightly into the ground.

"I just—" she started, then stopped, her thoughts tangling together. "Everything's changing. The quest, StarClan, all of it—and it feels like everyone's watching me, waiting for me to be something I don't even understand yet."

Her voice faltered slightly.

"And then Duskpelt says things like that and I—" She shook her head once, frustrated. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do with it."

Silence followed, not empty but heavy.

Pinesun shifted his weight slightly, his gaze drifting past her for a moment—toward the camp, out of focus.

"When the war happened..." he began slowly, his voice quieter than she had ever heard it.

Fogpaw looked up.

"I lost my mother," he continued. "Blackrose."

The name settled heavily.

"And Coldpaw," he added after a moment. "My sister."

Fogpaw's breath caught.

"I didn't get to do anything," he went on. "Didn't get to help them. One moment they were there—and the next..."

He didn't finish.

He didn't need to.

"I rushed in," he whispered instead. "Too fast. I didn't think—I just reacted."

Fogpaw's ears flicked slightly.

"I got myself hurt," he continued, his voice tightening just a fraction. "Bad enough that I couldn't keep fighting. Couldn't get back to them."

The words hung there, heavier now.

"I keep thinking," he murmured, "if I hadn't been a mouse-brain and stepped in so quickly... if I had just slowed down, thought it through—maybe I could have done something that actually mattered."

He exhaled slowly.

"But I didn't."

Fogpaw's chest fluttered, her earlier frustration softening into sympathy.

"So now," Pinesun went on, his gaze steady but still quiet, "I don't step in unless I'm sure it will help. Because the last time I acted without thinking... I lost them anyway."

A pause.

"And I didn't want to make things worse for you by doing the same."

Fogpaw stared at him, the weight of his words settling slowly.

That was why.

Not because he didn't care.

But because he cared *too much* to risk doing the wrong thing.

"...You wouldn't have made it worse," she mewed softly.

Pinesun gave a small, almost tired huff. "Maybe not."

His gaze lifted back to hers.

"But I didn't know that."

Silence fell between them again—but this time, it felt more comfortable.

Fogpaw shifted her paws slightly, her tail lowering.

"I'm still glad you're coming," she murmured after a moment.

A faint warmth returned to his expression.

"...Good," he sighed with relief. "Because I wasn't planning on letting you go alone."

That earned the smallest hint of a smile from her.

# Chapter 19- Like a Fish Out of Water

After his meeting with Freezingpaw, life in ShadowClan moved on quietly around Snowpaw.

Quietly, but not calmly.

The air had begun to shift as newleaf slowly pushed its way through the last grip of leaf-bare. The mornings were still cold, but by midday the forest softened. The wind no longer bit as sharply, and here and there, the green shoots pressed higher above the thawing earth.

Prey was returning, and with it, change.

The half-moon was approaching quickly now. It lingered in every conversation, every patrol assignment, every glance exchanged between warriors. Soon, the chosen cats would leave. Soon, the Clans would send them out to find what StarClan had foretold.

The quest was no longer distant. It was coming, and Snowpaw increasingly felt like a fish out of water.

...

He kept busy.

That was the easiest way to ignore it.

Training filled most of his time now. Vineclaw had taken him out early that morning, the two of them moving through the forest in silence until they reached a small clearing speckled with sprouts.

"Again," Vineclaw had instructed.

Snowpaw didn't hesitate.

He lunged forward, twisting mid-step, aiming for a clean strike just as he had been shown. His paws hit their mark with more precision than before, his balance holding steady even as he adjusted his weight.

*Better.*

Vineclaw gave a short nod. "Good. You're improving."

Snowpaw straightened slightly, his chest rising with the effort.

*Improving.*

The word sat strangely.

"...I want to try again," he declared.

Vineclaw's whiskers twitched faintly, but he didn't argue.

They repeated the movement. And again. And again. Each time sharper, faster, and cleaner. Until Snowpaw's muscles began to ache beneath his fur.

Finally, Vineclaw stepped back. "That's enough."

Snowpaw stilled, his breath coming slightly heavier now.

"...Was it right?" he asked.

"It was good," Vineclaw replied.

Snowpaw's ears flicked in irritation.

*That's it?*

He dipped his head anyway, masking the thought.

...

Later, back in camp, the usual rhythms continued.

Snowpaw hurried toward the fresh-kill pile, after bidding goodbye to Vineclaw, hunger gnawing at his belly.

Nettlepaw was already there, crouched beside the pile, her tail flicking as she nudged at a small squirrel.

"That one's mine," she mewed without looking up.

Snowpaw snorted softly. "You didn't even catch it."

"Doesn't matter," Nettlepaw shot back. "I saw it first."

"That's not how that works."

"It is now."

Snowpaw moved forward anyway, hooking the squirrel lightly with his paw before she could grab it.

"Hey—!"

She swiped at him, not hard enough to hurt, just enough to make him pull back and drop the squirrel with a huff of amusement.

"You're impossible," she muttered.

"You started it."

Nettlepaw narrowed her eyes at him, but there was no real heat behind it.

Then, after a moment—

"...You've been weird," she added.

Snowpaw paused.

"What?"

"You've been acting weird lately," she repeated, more firmly this time. "Quiet. And not the normal kind of quiet."

Snowpaw shrugged, turning slightly away. "I'm fine."

Nettlepaw didn't look convinced.

"Mhm," she said, clearly not believing him. "Sure you are."

He didn't argue or try to explain. Instead, he picked up a shrew and took a bite, hoping that would be the end of it.

It wasn't.

"You're thinking about the quest, aren't you?" Nettlepaw pressed.

Snowpaw's whiskers twitched.

"...Everyone is."

"That's not what I meant," she mewed.

He didn't respond.

Nettlepaw studied him for a moment longer, then huffed softly. "Fine," she muttered. "Keep your secrets."

But she didn't push further.

For that, he was grateful.

...

The camp shifted as the day went on.

Cats moved in and out, patrols forming and dispersing, quiet conversations threading through the clearing. The sun dipped slowly lower, casting long shadows across the ground.

Snowpaw found himself watching without meaning to.

Fogpaw stood near the center of camp, speaking quietly with Moongaze, her posture more focused than it had been before. Pinesun lingered not far from her, his attention half on their conversation, half on the camp around them.

Snowpaw's tail flicked once.

It wasn't just that she'd been chosen, it was how easily everything seemed to settle around her. The way the others spoke to her now—

more carefully, more deliberately. As if she had already stepped into something bigger, and everyone else was simply... adjusting.

A low murmur of voices drifted from behind him.

"...I'm just saying, Duskpelt didn't need to go that far," Flowerdew was mewing, her tone softer than usual.

Snowpaw's ears twitched. He didn't turn, but he listened carefully.

Cinderstep let out a quiet huff. "My sister has always been like that. Says things before she thinks them through."

"That wasn't just thoughtless," Flowerdew replied. "It was unfair."

A brief pause.

"...Fogpaw didn't deserve that."

Snowpaw stilled slightly, his gaze flicking back toward the center of camp.

Fogpaw was still speaking with Moongaze, her expression steady and composed, like nothing had happened at all.

Pinesun shifted slightly closer to her, his posture subtle but protective.

Snowpaw's claws pressed faintly into the ground.

*What happened?*

He hadn't heard anything about it before.

And yet—

Something in the way Flowerdew had said it lingered.

*Fogpaw didn't deserve that.*

Snowpaw looked back at her again, trying to find some trace of it—some sign that something had been wrong.

But there was nothing, just that same quiet certainty. Like she already belonged where she was standing.

Snowpaw looked away, a strange, restless feeling settling in his chest.

*I missed something.*

...

That night, sleep came easier than it should have.

Snowpaw barely remembered curling into his nest, the low murmur of the camp fading into silence as exhaustion pulled at him. For once, his thoughts didn't circle endlessly. The tension that had followed him all day seemed to loosen its grip, just enough for him to drift.

And then—

He woke.

But not in his nest.

Snowpaw stood still, his breath catching slightly as he took in his surroundings. The air felt wrong here—thick and unmoving, as if it had been left undisturbed for moons. The ground beneath his paws was cold and hard, packed flat with no scent of prey, no trace of life. There was no sound, not even wind.

He turned slowly.

The forest stretched out before him—but it wasn't *their* forest. The trees stood taller, darker, their branches twisted in unnatural shapes that clawed toward the sky. No stars shone above them. No moonlight filtered through.

Only a dim, colorless glow that seemed to come from nowhere at all.

Snowpaw's ears flattened slightly.

*This isn't StarClan.*

The realization came quickly.

This place felt nothing like the warmth he had heard described in stories. There was no comfort or peace here. Only a stillness that was suited for no living being.

He took a cautious step forward.

Then another.

The ground didn't shift. Even his own pawsteps felt swallowed, as if the forest refused to acknowledge him.

A faint unease curled in his chest.

*Where am I?*

He stopped, sensing a looming presence.

Snowpaw's fur bristled slightly as he turned, his gaze scanning the shadows between the trees. For a moment, there was nothing.

Then—

A shape detached itself from the darkness, stepping forward with slow, deliberate ease.

A tom. Broad-shouldered and scarred. His pelt dark, though the dim light caught along its silver edges in a way that made it seem almost... shifting. His eyes burned a brighter blue than anything else in that empty place.

Snowpaw's claws slid out instinctively.

The tom didn't react, he simply stopped a few tail-lengths away, his gaze fixed steadily on Snowpaw as if he had been expecting him.

Snowpaw swallowed, forcing himself to hold his ground.

"...You're the one who's been speaking to me?"

The words came out more steady than he felt.

The tom's gaze didn't waver.

For a heartbeat, the forest seemed to press in closer around them, the silence tightening and sharpening.

Then—

He stepped forward once more, just enough to close the distance.

"Yes," he said.

His voice was low, controlled, and familiar in a way that made Snowpaw's heart pound.

"I'm Rapidstar."

# Chapter 20- Two Sides of the Same Sky

Sleep didn't leave Snowpaw gently.

He woke with it still clinging to him—thick and heavy, like the forest he had just stood in hadn't fully released its hold. For a long moment, he didn't move, his body still curled in his nest as his thoughts struggled to separate dream from waking.

The camp slowly came back into focus around him. The familiar scents of ShadowClan settled into place first—damp earth, moss, the faint trace of fresh-kill lingering somewhere nearby. His denmates had already left their nests, missing whatever had pulled him so abruptly from sleep. An early morning breeze pressed lightly against his fur, warmer now that newleaf was beginning to take its grip.

But something still felt... off.

Snowpaw blinked, his gaze unfocused as the memory settled more clearly into place. The forest rose again in his mind—not their forest, but the other one.

And—

Rapidstar.

His claws pressed lightly into the moss beneath him, grounding himself as the name echoed through his thoughts. It felt heavier now. Real in a way it hadn't before.

Not just a voice in the back of his mind. Not something distant or easy to ignore.

He had seen him.

Spoken to him.

Snowpaw pushed himself upright slowly as the camp began to stir. A few warriors were already awake, moving through the clearing with quiet purpose as the first light of dawn brushed faintly against the camp walls. The world was continuing as it always did.

But his thoughts hadn't left that place.

They circled back, again and again, refusing to settle.

*You want to make a difference.*

The words lingered, coaxing, as if they had never fully stopped.

Snowpaw's ears flicked back slightly.

*I can teach you.*

He swallowed, his throat suddenly dry.

That was the part that unsettled him most.

Rapidstar hadn't sounded *wrong*. There had been no threat in his voice. No anger. No edge of darkness like the stories had warned. Only certainty. Only something that felt... familiar. Like being understood in a way Snowpaw hadn't expected.

Snowpaw exhaled slowly, shaking his head once as if that alone could clear it.

*It's the Dark Forest.*

He knew that.

He wasn't mouse-brained enough to forget it.

And yet—

*What if he's right?*

The thought slipped in before he could stop it.

Snowpaw's gaze drifted toward the center of camp. Movement had picked up now. Cats were gathering, voices low but purposeful, the

clearing beginning to fill.

And at the center of it—

Fogpaw.

She stood near the middle of the clearing, her posture more alert than usual, her eyes moving as if she were trying to take everything in at once. Pinesun stood beside her, calm but focused, while Seedspring spoke quietly with Mintbreeze a few tail-lengths away.

This was it.

They were leaving.

Snowpaw rose to his paws, his body moving before he had fully decided to. He crossed the clearing slowly, weaving between the other cats as they gathered, the sounds of the camp dulling slightly as his focus narrowed.

Fogpaw noticed him first.

"Snowpaw," she greeted, her expression weary as he approached.

He stopped in front of her, searching for something to say—but for a moment, nothing came.

*Tell her.*

The thought surfaced suddenly.

*About the dream. About him. About everything.*

His claws pressed lightly into the ground.

No.

Not now.

"...You're really going," he remarked instead.

Fogpaw gave a small nod. "I think I have to."

There was something steady in her voice. Certain in a way that made his chest tighten slightly.

Snowpaw studied her for a moment, as if trying to fix the image of her exactly as she was now.

"May StarClan light your path," he mumbled.

His words felt smaller than they should have.

Fogpaw's expression softened. "Thank you, Snow."

A quiet pause settled between them, the sounds of the camp drifting back in around them.

Then, without fully thinking it through, Snowpaw stepped a little closer.

The movement felt almost unfamiliar—like something he hadn't quite decided on yet.

For a heartbeat, he hesitated.

Then he leaned forward and brushed his muzzle briefly against hers.

It wasn't something he usually did. Not like this. Not without a teasing comment or a flick of his tail to soften it. But this time, there was no teasing or deflection.

"Come back," he murmured, quieter now.

Fogpaw blinked, caught off guard—surprise flickering across her expression at the unexpected closeness, at the softness in his voice. For a moment, she simply looked at him, before something gentler replaced it.

"I will," she mewed.

She hesitated, then added, "Keep an eye on things here. In case anything feels... off."

Snowpaw's ears flicked.

"...Of course," he said.

*I will.*

Her words settled heavier than she could have known.

For a moment longer, neither of them moved.

Then the camp shifted again—voices rising, cats stepping forward, the quiet moment dissolving as the weight of the day pressed back in.

Snowpaw stepped back slightly.

And just like that—

The moment was over.

.

.

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Fogpaw exhaled slowly as she turned back toward the clearing.

*This is really happening.*

The camp felt fuller somehow, every cat gathered closer than usual, as if the camp itself had tightened around them. The early light of dawn filtered softly through the bordering trees, catching on shifting pelts and quiet movement. Even the air felt heavier, thick with anticipation and unspoken vows.

Mintbreeze stood just ahead, his tail curled neatly around his paws as Seedspring faced him.

"Take these," he mewed, nudging forward a small bundle of leaves bound carefully together with thin strands of grass.

Seedspring leaned down, inspecting them more closely, his nose twitching as the scents reached him.

"Traveling herbs," Mintbreeze continued, his tone measured but deliberate. "Sorrel to keep your strength up, and to dull hunger if prey is scarce. Daisy leaves—you'll want those if your joints begin to ache from long stretches of walking. Chamomile as well... for steadying the mind and heart. Journeys like this can wear on a cat in ways you don't expect."

He paused briefly, then added, quieter, "And burnet. It won't do much on its own, but it will help keep your energy from fading too quickly."

Seedspring nodded, committing it all to memory. "That should be enough."

"It will have to be," Mintbreeze replied, though there was a faint edge of reluctance in his voice. His gaze lingered on Seedspring a moment longer than necessary. "Use them wisely. You won't have me there to remind you."

Seedspring dipped his head. "I understand."

Mintbreeze gave a small nod, but didn't look away. "Stay sharp," he added quietly.

Then, Vineclaw stepped forward, his voice carrying clearly enough for the gathered cats as the attention of the patrol shifted toward him.

"The path to the gorge isn't short," he began, his tone steady and experienced. "And it won't feel like anything you're used to."

Fogpaw's ears pricked forward.

"After you meet up with the others at Fourtrees, you will follow the river through WindClan's territory. You will pass a farm and then cross a tangle of Thunderpaths. Stay alert there—the monsters don't slow for anything." His gaze flicked briefly toward the group before continuing. "Once you're beyond that, the terrain begins to change. The trees thin out, and the ground rises uneven beneath your paws."

He paced a few steps, recalling it.

"You'll want to keep to higher ground where you can. The river runs north past Highstones, and if you follow its direction, it will lead you toward the gorge."

A slight murmur passed through the group.

"The land will open," Vineclaw continued, his voice lowering slightly. "And then it will drop. Not gradually, but suddenly. Steep walls, carved stone, and a hollow that feels like it was split open by a force stronger than StarClan. That's how you'll know you've made it."

Fogpaw felt a small chill run down her spine.

"I've been there once," he finished. "And it's not a place you can walk to overnight. It will take up to three quarters of a moon. Watch your footing. Watch each other."

The clearing fell quieter after that, but the patrol still nodded their thanks.

Fogpaw relinquished her attention as Driftswipe approached her.

Her mother's gaze was soft, but unwavering, her tail brushing gently along Fogpaw's shoulder as if grounding her there.

"Come here," she murmured.

Fogpaw stepped closer without hesitation, leaning into the familiar warmth.

"You are stronger than you think," Driftswipe said quietly, her voice low enough that only Fogpaw could hear. "You carry my resolve... and your father's patience."

Fogpaw blinked, her chest tightening slightly.

"There is no one more suited for this than you," Driftswipe continued, touching her nose briefly to Fogpaw's forehead. "Not because StarClan chose you, but because you will choose to do what is right, no matter how difficult it becomes."

"You will do right by your Clan," her mother added softly. "And by Splitstar."

That name settled between them—heavy, important, and impossible to ignore.

Fogpaw swallowed, then dipped her head, her voice steady despite the dam threatening to burst beneath her chest. "I'll make sure it means something. I won't waste the chance they've given me."

Driftswipe's gaze lightened with a flash of pride.

Bonerun stepped forward then, his expression more guarded, but no less intense.

"You listen to Seedspring and Pinesun," he said, his tone firm. "And you don't take unnecessary risks trying to prove anything."

Fogpaw let out the faintest breath of amusement, though her chest still felt tight. "When have I ever done that?" she muttered lightly—then, more seriously, "I'll be careful. I promise."

She hesitated, then added, "Both of you... thank you."

Driftswipe and Bonerun shared a glance before nodding and retreating to where Snowpaw stood near the edge of the cluster.

Fogpaw turned her attention as Oakcloud padded forward, his gaze settling on his remaining kin, Pinesun and Seedspring.

"You two," he mewed, his tone strained but warm. "Come back in one piece."

Seedspring dipped his head as Pinesun gave a small nod, purring lightly. "You're not getting rid of us just yet."

Nettlepaw pushed her way to the front next, her usual confidence wavering just slightly.

"You better return with a good story," she said, her whiskers twitching, though her voice carried a hint of truth beneath it.

Fogpaw huffed a quiet laugh. "I'll try."

She turned slightly—

And met Moongaze's amber eyes.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

He padded closer, his pale silver pelt catching the morning light, his presence grounded in something deeper that had endured far longer than the rest of them could understand.

"You've trained for this," he mewed at last, his voice low but certain. "I've made sure of it."

Fogpaw blinked, caught off guard—not by the words, but by the quiet confidence behind them.

A small, almost nervous breath escaped her. "I was starting to think you were just trying to exhaust me before I left."

The faintest flicker of amusement touched his expression, but it didn't last long.

"You're ready," he declared.

The words settled differently than anything else had. Not pressure or expectation. Just truth.

Fogpaw shifted her paws slightly, grounding herself in it. "Then I won't let that training go to waste."

A brief silence followed.

"I meant what I said before," she added, her voice lowering. "She's still there."

Moongaze's eyes flared—vulnerability surfacing beneath the depths.

"I trust you," he murmured. "And you should trust yourself. Not just what you see, but what you feel. That's where StarClan speaks the clearest."

Fogpaw nodded slowly, taking that in.

"And if she's reaching for you..." he continued, his voice tightening just slightly, "don't turn away from it."

Fogpaw met his gaze fully now. "I won't run from it," she said. "Not this time."

Moongaze studied her for a heartbeat longer.

"...Bring her back to us," he sighed, softer now.

Fogpaw's chest tightened, but this time, it didn't feel overwhelming. It felt grounding.

"I'm going to try," she said, more firmly. "Whatever it takes, I'll figure it out."

Darkstar cleared his throat then, standing at the front of the gathered cats, his presence steadying the clearing.

"You leave with the support of ShadowClan," he yowled, his voice calm but firm. "You represent more than yourselves out there."

Fogpaw straightened slightly as a chorus of yowls echoed him.

He dipped his head. "StarClan be with you."

It was time.

The three cats exchanged a quick glance, their eyes meeting for only a heartbeat as if confirming the same thought, before they padded forward in quiet unison.

The journey beyond camp waited, unfamiliar and uncertain, but calling.

Behind her, Snowpaw watched.

Ahead of her—

Everything was about to begin.

# Chapter 21- At the Root of It All

By the time they reached Fourtrees, the sun had begun its slow climb toward the center of the sky, casting strong light through the budding branches that stretched high above the clearing. Even with newleaf beginning to settle in, the air still carried a lingering chill, though it was softer now—less biting, more like a quiet reminder of the season that had only just passed.

Fogpaw slowed as they approached the edge of the clearing, her paws instinctively quieter against the forest floor. Fourtrees always felt different from the rest of the territory. Larger. Older. As if every step taken here mattered more.

Or perhaps that was just because this time, it did.

Ahead of her, Pinesun paused first, his ears flicking forward as he scanned the clearing. Seedspring stepped up beside him, calm as ever, though Fogpaw noticed the slight lift of his chin as he took in their surroundings.

"We're not the first ones here," Pinesun murmured.

Fogpaw followed his gaze.

A small group of cats stood near the root of one of the great oaks, their pelts reflecting the filtered sunlight in shifting patterns of light and shadow. They were already gathered, waiting for them.

Her chest tightened—not with fear, but a feeling close to awareness.

This was it.

Seedspring took a step forward first, his voice carrying easily across the clearing. "Looks like we made it on time."

The other cats turned.

For a moment, there was silence—not tense, but assessing. Curious.

Each of them taking in the newcomers just as Fogpaw found herself doing the same.

The first to step forward was a tall, broad-shouldered tom with a dark, smoky pelt that seemed to catch the light in muted tones. His yellow eyes were steady, calm, though there was something about his size and presence that made Fogpaw instinctively straighten.

"Flintclaw," he introduced himself, his voice deep but even. "ThunderClan."

Fogpaw blinked, a little surprised by how gentle his tone was compared to his imposing appearance.

"We would have sent more," he added, glancing briefly between them, "but white cough has been spreading through our camp. Fernstar couldn't spare the numbers."

Seedspring dipped his head respectfully. "One is enough. We're glad you came."

Flintclaw gave a small nod, stepping back to allow the others forward.

A sleek white she-cat with black flecks followed next, her paws placed with careful precision, her fur immaculate despite the damp forest floor beneath her. Her blue eyes swept over them, lingering just a moment too long on the edges of their pelts, as if quietly noting every bit of dirt they had picked up along the way.

"Swanflight," she said, her voice smooth, almost airy. "RiverClan."

Fogpaw noticed the way Swanflight's tail curled neatly around her paws as she stood, composed and deliberate in every movement.

"*We* were meant to send only one cat," Swanflight continued, her gaze shifting briefly toward Flintclaw and then back again, "so there were no surprises on our end."

Pinesun's whiskers twitched slightly beside her, though he said nothing.

As Fogpaw was preparing to introduce herself, another voice cut in —lighter, quicker.

"You're Fogpaw, right?"

A silver tabby tom stood a little apart from the others, his blue eyes bright with curiosity as they flicked between each of them in quick succession. There was an energy to him that felt sharper, but not in an unfriendly way. More like he was constantly thinking, constantly noticing.

"Dewpaw," he mewed before she could answer, dipping his head slightly. "WindClan. Apprentice to Dustwhisper." He gestured with his tail toward a cream-colored she-cat standing just behind him, her posture quiet but alert.

Dustwhisper inclined her head in greeting, her pale amber eyes observant but unreadable.

"I recognized you from the Gathering," Dewpaw added, his gaze flicking back to Fogpaw. "You stood near the center of the clearing —ShadowClan apprentice, recently named."

Fogpaw blinked.

"...You remember all that?"

Dewpaw tilted his head slightly, as if the answer were obvious. "Of course! It's important to know who you're traveling with."

There was no arrogance in it—just fact.

Something in Fogpaw's chest shifted, just slightly. He seemed like the kind of cat who noticed more than he admitted.

"...Right," she said.

Pinesun stepped forward then, his pelt brushing lightly against her. His gaze lingered on Dewpaw for a moment—measured, assessing—before he spoke. "I'm Pinesun," he mewed, his tone steady. "ShadowClan."

Seedspring followed. "Seedspring. Medicine cat of ShadowClan."

Swanflight's ears twitched at that, her gaze sharpening as it swept over the three of them again.

"*Three* cats?" she mewed, her tone smooth but edged with quiet scrutiny. "ShadowClan must be feeling... generous. Or are you trying to stand out?"

Her eyes lingered briefly on Seedspring.

"And a medicine cat," she added, almost thoughtfully. "That seems like an unusual choice for a journey like this."

Fogpaw felt her shoulders stiffen slightly.

Before she could respond, Dewpaw's ears perked, his expression brightening with interest.

"Well," he chirped, stepping forward. "Statistically speaking, journeys without a medicine cat tend to end poorly!"

Dustwhisper's tail flicked once, lightly brushing his side.

"That's enough," she murmured.

He dipped his head slightly, though the faint glint of amusement didn't leave his eyes as Swanflight crinkled her nose.

For a moment, the group settled into a quiet stillness again—not uncomfortable, but adjusting. Taking measure of one another and learning the rhythm of unfamiliar presences.

Fogpaw shifted her weight, her gaze drifting across the group.

Flintclaw stood steady and unmoving, like a silent anchor. Swanflight held herself with astute precision, her attention sharp even when she said nothing. Dewpaw's eyes moved constantly, absorbing everything, while Dustwhisper watched with a quieter kind of focus.

And beside her—

Pinesun and Seedspring who were familiar and grounding.

This wasn't just her.

It wasn't just ShadowClan.

It was all of them now.

Seedspring glanced between the gathered cats, then toward the path beyond Fourtrees. "We should get moving," he said. "The sooner we start, the more ground we can cover before sundown."

Flintclaw nodded. "Agreed."

Swanflight rose smoothly to her paws, giving a small flick of her tail. "Then let's not waste any more time."

Dewpaw shifted forward eagerly, already scanning the direction they would be heading. "If we follow the river once we reach WindClan territory, we should be able to keep a consistent path north," he offered.

"You'll follow *our* lead when we get there," Dustwhisper corrected calmly, though not unkindly.

Dewpaw dipped his head. "Of course."

Fogpaw suppressed a huff of laughter before taking one last glance around the clearing.

Fourtrees stood tall and silent behind them, its great oaks stretching skyward as they always had, unchanged despite everything that had started to shift.

This was where it started.

Not with StarClan.

Not with the dreams.

But here, with them.

She stepped forward, and this time, she didn't hesitate.

# Chapter 22- The First Stretch

Fogpaw noticed it gradually as they left Fourtrees behind—the trees growing farther apart, the undergrowth less tangled beneath her paws. The air felt different too. Light in a sharper, cleaner way, carrying scents that didn't cling so heavily to the ground.

Wind.

She wasn't used to it.

It slipped through her fur in restless currents, tugging lightly at her pelt as they climbed the gentle rise into WindClan territory, following the river. The land stretched open before them in a way that made her pause for half a heartbeat.

There was no cover.

No shadows to tuck into.

Just rolling moorland, pale grasses bending under the breeze, and sky—endless and wide above them.

*How do they live like this?*

Fogpaw padded forward anyway, her paws adjusting to the unfamiliar terrain as the others moved ahead.

Dewpaw was already walking near the front, his pace quick but not careless, his gaze snapping constantly across the landscape as if taking in every detail at once.

"You'll get used to it," he called, glancing back at her as if he had plucked the thought straight from her mind. "The wind feels strange at first, but it's actually helpful—carries scent farther and makes it easier to track movement."

Fogpaw squinted slightly.

"...I didn't say anything."

Dewpaw's whiskers twitched. "You didn't have to."

Pinesun let out a quiet huff beside her, his tail brushing lightly against her flank as he matched her pace.

"You're staring," he murmured.

Fogpaw glanced at him. "Am not."

"You are," he said, though there was a faint hint of amusement in his voice.

She flicked her tail in response, though her gaze drifted back out across the open land anyway.

Just behind Dewpaw, Dustwhisper kept a slower pace, her steps measured and efficient as she followed his path without needing to match his energy. Her gaze didn't wander as much as his did—when she looked, it was deliberate, scanning the horizon in slow, controlled sweeps.

Seedspring had settled slightly off to the side of the group, walking along the edge of their formation where the wind carried the clearest scents. His nose lifted occasionally, testing the air, his attention split between the land ahead and the cats around him, as if ensuring nothing went unnoticed.

Ahead of them, Flintclaw moved steadily, his large paws sure even on the uneven ground, while Swanflight picked her way across the moor with far more care, lifting her paws slightly higher than necessary to avoid brushing against the rough grass.

"This terrain is... exposed," Swanflight commented, her nose wrinkling ever so slightly. "I don't understand how you manage without proper shelter."

"We manage just fine," Dustwhisper replied calmly, not looking back.

Dewpaw flicked his ears. "It's efficient. Less obstruction. Easier

visibility."

"Less dignity," Swanflight muttered under her breath.

Fogpaw hid a small flicker of amusement.

The tension wasn't sharp—not yet—but it was there. Lingering beneath their words, threading through the differences in how they moved, how they spoke.

Different Clans, same path.

For now.

They padded for some time, the rhythm of travel settling slowly into place. The ground shifted beneath their paws—softer in some places, harder in others—and Fogpaw found herself concentrating more than usual just to keep her footing steady.

The wind never truly settled as they moved. It pressed steadily against Fogpaw's pelt, slipping through the grass in restless waves that whispered around their paws. At first it had felt distracting, something to brace against—but now it had become the pulse of the moor, constant and impossible to ignore.

After a while, a new scent began to weave through it.

Fogpaw slowed slightly, her nose twitching as she tried to make sense of it. It was thick and unfamiliar, heavier than anything she had scented before—too strong to be prey, but not sharp like fox or dog. It lingered in the air in a way that made her ears flatten uncertainly.

"What *is* that?" she asked, glancing ahead.

Dewpaw's ears perked immediately, his whole expression brightening with interest. "Oh—those are farm animals," he mewed, as if that explained everything.

Fogpaw blinked. "...Those are what?"

"You'll see," he replied, already stepping a little quicker as he

motioned forward with his tail.

They crested a gentle rise, and the land dipped just beyond it.

What Fogpaw noticed first wasn't the animals—but the barrier.

A strange line of tangled branches stretched across the edge of the dip, stacked and woven together in a rough, uneven wall. Some of the wood was pale and splintered, others darker with age, all of it pressed together in a way that didn't look natural. It wasn't quite like fallen bramble or storm debris—it was too deliberate, too contained.

It looked like something *made*.

Fogpaw slowed, her gaze narrowing as she took it in, before her attention shifted past it.

Shapes moved beyond the barrier.

Large, rounded bodies drifted lazily across the open space, their pelts thick and uneven, clumped into soft, woolly masses that caught the light in dull patches of white and cream. They grazed slowly, heads lowered, tearing at the grass without urgency, as if nothing in the world could disturb them.

Fogpaw stopped completely, staring.

"...What *are* those?" she murmured, her voice edged with disbelief.

"They're sheep," Dewpaw said brightly, clearly pleased. "Twoleg prey. They don't run much, which makes them inefficient hunters, but they're kept by Twolegs for their wool and milk. Did you know—"

"You're telling me those are prey?" Pinesun interrupted, squinting.

"Well, technically—"

"They're huge!"

"They're also not for us," Dustwhisper cut in calmly.

Dewpaw dipped his head, though his tail flicked with restrained energy. "Right. Not for us."

Fogpaw stared a moment longer as one of the sheep lifted its head, blinking at them with dull disinterest before returning to grazing.

Swanflight, who had been standing a careful distance from the wall of tangled branches, lifted one paw delicately as a breeze shifted the scent toward her. Her nose wrinkled almost immediately.

"They smell like fishbreath," she muttered, drawing her tail closer to her side as if to avoid brushing against anything out of place.

Before anyone could respond, one of the sheep suddenly lifted its head—

—and let out a loud, abrupt bleat that echoed across the moor.

Seedspring jolted, his fur puffing as he took a quick step back. "Great StarClan—!"

For half a heartbeat, there was stunned silence.

Then Pinesun let out a snort, quickly followed by Dewpaw's bright, uncontained chirrup of laughter. Even Fogpaw felt a laugh escape her, the tension breaking as easily as it had come.

Flintclaw's whiskers twitched, the faintest hint of amusement touching his otherwise composed expression, while Swanflight blinked once, clearly startled despite herself before she quickly smoothed her posture again.

"It makes *that* noise?" Pinesun said, still staring.

Fogpaw shook her head slightly, her gaze drifting back to the sheep as it lowered its head again, completely unconcerned.

*They don't even care we're here.*

"That's... strange," she murmured.

"You get used to it," Dewpaw mewed again, still sounding far too

pleased.

Pinesun didn't look convinced.

They moved on soon after, leaving the fence and the strange creatures behind them as the moor stretched on.

The sun had begun to dip by the time Flintclaw finally slowed.

"We'll stop here," he said, his voice calm but decisive. "There's enough cover along that ridge to shelter from the wind."

Fogpaw glanced ahead. The land dipped slightly, offering a shallow break in the endless openness—nothing like a forest, but enough to feel... protected.

They spread out without needing much direction, instinct taking over as the group shifted from traveling to hunting.

Fogpaw lowered herself into the grass, her body falling into familiar patterns despite the unfamiliar terrain. The wind tugged at her fur again, threading through the open moor without resistance, shifting constantly in a way that made it harder to settle.

She stilled anyway and forced herself to focus.

The scent of a rabbit reached her faintly, carried along the current —but it flickered, thinning and strengthening with every change in the wind.

Fogpaw adjusted her stance, angling herself the way she would in the forest.

Wait.

Watch.

Then move.

She crept forward, her paws careful, her body low—but the ground felt different beneath her. The grass bent too easily, offering less cover than she expected, and the wind shifted again, pushing her

scent ahead of her before she could correct for it.

The rabbit's head snapped up.

Fogpaw froze.

Too late.

It bolted.

She lunged after it anyway, her paws pounding across the uneven ground as she chased, stretching forward with everything she had—but the open land gave it too much space. It darted sharply to the side, then again, faster than she could adjust.

Fogpaw skidded to a halt, breath catching slightly as the rabbit disappeared into the tall grass ahead.

*Mouse-dung!*

Her chest rose and fell as she stood there, staring at where it had vanished.

*This is nothing like the forest.*

The thought came sharp and immediate as frustration built in her chest, her tail twitching in annoyance.

In ShadowClan territory, she would have had cover. Shadows, roots, and undergrowth to break her outline, to trap the prey into tighter paths.

Here, there was nothing to hide behind.

Only wind.

Fogpaw exhaled slowly, forcing her breathing to steady as she lifted her head, ears flicking as she reset.

*Then I'll learn.*

Across the ridge, she caught sight of Dewpaw returning with a piece of prey, his expression bright, while Swanflight approached more

carefully, her catch held neatly between her jaws as if even hunting required a certain elegance.

Flintclaw and Pinesun came back empty-pawed, while Dustwhisper returned last, carrying enough prey for more than one cat, setting it down without comment.

They gathered as the light began to fade, the sky deepening into soft shades of dusk. There was a comfortable silence as they shared the fresh-kill, the earlier tension softened by the steady pace of eating and the quiet end to a long day.

Seedspring moved between them after a few moments, setting down the small bundle of herbs he had carried from camp. He nudged a few leaves toward the center of the group.

"Eat a little of these with your food," he mewed, his tone leaving no room for argument. "They'll help with the travel."

Dewpaw leaned forward, sniffing with interest. "Sorrel?" he guessed.

Seedspring gave a small nod. "And burnet. It'll help keep your strength from fading too quickly."

The cats took what was offered, mixing the herbs with their prey without much hesitation.

"I'm still curious," Swanflight mewed after a while, her gaze flicking between them. "Why apprentices were chosen for this journey at all."

Fogpaw's ears twitched slightly.

Dewpaw opened his mouth immediately.

"I was selected because—"

"Because he is *observant*," Dustwhisper cut in, her tone firm.

Dewpaw paused, blinking slightly.

Dustwhisper continued, her gaze steady as it settled briefly on

Swanflight. "He listens. He remembers. And he notices things most cats overlook. Redstar chose him for a reason."

There was no defensiveness in her voice—just certainty.

Dewpaw's ears lifted a fraction, something pleased but contained flickering across his expression before he added, a touch more measured now, "I... tend to pick up on patterns. It's useful."

"That's one way of putting it," Dustwhisper murmured, though there was a faint note of approval beneath it now.

Swanflight's gaze lingered a moment before shifting and settling on Fogpaw.

"And you?"

For a moment, she didn't know what to say.

"She's connected to the prophecy," Seedspring mewed simply.

The words settled into the space between them, quiet but heavy.

Fogpaw felt it immediately—the shift.

The others turned toward her, their gazes sharpening as they took her in more closely now, not just as another cat in the patrol, but as something... more.

Heat crept beneath her fur. She resisted the urge to squirm, forcing herself to stay still as their attention lingered.

Swanflight studied her for a moment longer than was comfortable—but this time, there was less judgment in her gaze.

More consideration.

"...I see," she said.

No one pressed further.

The stars had begun to emerge overhead by then, faint at first, then sharper as the last of the light faded from the sky.

Fogpaw lifted her gaze briefly.

*StarClan…*

Her chest tightened—not painfully, but with a deeper feeling—purpose.

*I'm here now.*

Around her, the others began to settle—paws tucked beneath them, bodies curling slightly against the chill as the wind softened into a breeze.

Fogpaw shifted closer to Pinesun without thinking, the steady warmth of his presence grounding against the vast openness of the moor and the world ahead.

# Chapter 23- A Rude Awakening

Fogpaw did not realize she was dreaming at first.

The air felt different—too untouched by the restless movement she had grown used to. There was no harsh wind pressing through her fur, no shifting of leaves or distant rustle of prey. Instead, everything around her existed in a quiet, suspended calm, as if the world itself had paused.

She stood within a forest, but not one she recognized.

The shapes of trees rose around her, tall and familiar in form, yet their bark shimmered faintly as though woven from starlight rather than wood. Their leaves glowed with a soft sheen, each one catching the light in a way that made the entire canopy seem alive, gently flickering like the night sky. The ground beneath her paws was smooth and cool, not quite stone and not quite earth, reflecting the same dim, endless glow that surrounded her.

Above, the sky stretched wide—but instead of darkness, it shimmered with countless distant lights, as though she stood not beneath the stars, but within them.

Fogpaw turned slowly, her paws making no sound against the glowing forest floor. Even her own breathing felt quieter here, as though the world absorbed it before it could carry.

"Hello?" she called, her voice soft but steady.

For a moment, nothing answered.

Then—

"You've started to notice it, haven't you?"

Fogpaw stiffened, her ears snapping forward as she turned.

The she-cat stood a few tail-lengths away, as though she had always

been there.

Her pelt was a deep russet, rich and warm against the pale glow of the forest, though it seemed to carry its own light, faintly outlined by something not entirely of this world. Her eyes were steady—ancient, but not unkind—as they rested on Fogpaw with tranquility.

"...Who are you?" Fogpaw breathed.

The she-cat surveyed her for a heartbeat longer.

"Sharpstar," she replied.

The name settled over Fogpaw, heavy in a way that didn't feel unfamiliar. Recognition stirred in her chest, faint but undeniable, as though the memory had always been there, waiting.

Sharpstar stepped closer, her paws silent against the glowing ground, her gaze never leaving Fogpaw.

"You walk a path others cannot," she mewed, her voice even. "And yet you still ask why."

Fogpaw frowned, a flicker of unease tightening in her chest. "I didn't—"

"Have you ever wondered why you look the way you do?"

The question stopped her.

Fogpaw instinctively lifted her head, suddenly aware of herself—of the split in her face, the contrast of light and dark that had always set her apart. It had always been there, always noticed, always whispered about.

But never explained.

Sharpstar's gaze moved across her face with recognition and understanding.

"Have you ever wondered," she continued quietly, "why it was *you* who was chosen?"

Fogpaw's chest tightened.

"I didn't choose this," she said, more sharply than she intended. "Splitstar did."

Sharpstar tilted her head slightly.

"Did she?" she asked.

The space between them shifted—as if something unseen had just been uncovered.

Fogpaw's ears flicked back slightly, uncertainty creeping in. "What does that mean?"

Sharpstar did not answer right away.

Instead, she stepped past her slightly, her gaze lifting toward the shimmering forest around them.

"You stand where two paths meet," she mewed at last. "Between what was... and what still lingers. Between what lives... and what refuses to fade."

Fogpaw turned to face her again, unease tightening in her chest.

"I don't understand."

"You will," Sharpstar replied.

She stepped back, and as she did, the light around her began to thin, the glowing forest dimming at the edges as though it were being pulled away piece by piece.

"But not yet."

"Wait—" Fogpaw took a step forward, her paws finally feeling the slightest resistance beneath them. "What does that mean?"

Sharpstar's form flickered, her outline softening like mist in early dawn.

"Balance is not given," her voice echoed, quieter now, but no less

steady. "It is carried."

The forest dimmed.

The stars faded.

And the light slipped away.

Fogpaw's eyes snapped open. The world rushed back in around her —the scent of damp earth, the quiet breathing of the others, the faint rustle of wind threading through the sparse trees beyond their camp.

For a moment, she didn't move.

Her chest rose unevenly as the remnants of the dream clung to her, not fading the way most dreams did, but settling heavy and persistent, refusing to be forgotten.

*Have you ever wondered why you look the way you do?*

Her tail twitched faintly against the ground.

She had.

She just... never expected an answer.

Or a cat to ask the question at all.

Fogpaw pushed herself up slightly, her gaze sweeping across the camp. Pinesun still slept nearby, his breathing steady, while the others lay unmoving a few more tail-lengths away. Dewpaw, however, had begun to stir, shifting restlessly as the first hints of dawn crept into the sky.

But it wasn't them she focused on.

Seedspring lay just beyond her.

Fogpaw hesitated only a heartbeat before stepping closer, raising a paw and giving his shoulder a quick, insistent poke.

"Seedspring," she hissed softly. "Wake up!"

He stirred almost immediately, ears flicking before his eyes opened, alert despite the early hour.

"What is it?" he yawned, already lifting his head.

Fogpaw leaned in slightly, her voice low but urgent.

"I just had the strangest dream!"

Seedspring's expression sharpened attentively.

"StarClan?" he asked quietly.

Fogpaw nodded once. "I think so."

She hesitated, the name still sitting strangely in her chest.

"...Do you know a cat named Sharpstar?"

For a moment, Seedspring didn't answer.

Then something shifted in his expression—subtle but unmistakable recognition.

"...Yes," he said slowly.

Fogpaw's ears pricked forward.

"She was our leader before Splitstar," he continued, his voice quieter now, as though the name carried weight even here. "Some moons before you were born."

Fogpaw swallowed slightly. "She spoke to me."

That seemed to settle something.

Seedspring exhaled faintly, his gaze drifting for just a moment—not unfocused, but distant, as if recalling something he hadn't thought about in some time.

"She died at a Gathering," he said. "Rapidstar took her remaining lives."

Fogpaw's breath caught.

"At a Gathering?" she echoed, her voice barely above a whisper.

Seedspring gave a small nod. "It was quick. Most of the Clans didn't understand what was happening until it was over."

Silence stretched between them.

Fogpaw's thoughts tangled, the dream pressing more firmly into place now.

*Between what lives... and what still lingers.*

"...She asked me if I wondered why I look the way I do," Fogpaw mewed finally. "Why I was chosen."

Seedspring didn't interrupt.

"She said I stand between two paths," she went on, her gaze dropping briefly to the ground. "And that... balance is something I have to carry."

The words felt heavier now, spoken out loud.

For a moment, Seedspring was quiet.

Then, gently—

"That sounds like StarClan," he mewed.

Fogpaw let out a faint breath, though it didn't ease the tightness in her chest.

Seedspring added more quietly, "If they're speaking to you like this, it means there's more to understand. Maybe... this journey is where it becomes clearer."

The first light of dawn began to stretch across the ground then, soft and pale as it filtered through the trees.

Around them, the camp slowly began to stir.

But Fogpaw remained where she was for a moment longer, the weight of the dream settling deeper rather than fading.

...

By the time the sun had fully risen, they were on the move again after sharing left over prey from the moonrise before.

The land had begun to change in ways Fogpaw felt before she fully noticed them. The open stretch of moor had long since fallen behind, replaced by uneven patches of woodland where thin trees stood scattered along the river, their branches too sparse to offer the kind of cover she was used to. The ground beneath her paws had shifted as well—firmer, edged with stone and hardened earth that felt older somehow, as though it had endured far longer than the forest she knew.

There was a weight to it.

Fogpaw slowed slightly, her ears flicking as the air changed. The wind seemed to soften as they crested a rise, the world opening just enough for her to see it.

Highstones.

They rose in the distance, pale and towering against the horizon, their jagged edges cutting sharply into the sky. Even from where they stood, the stone seemed to catch the light in strange ways, reflecting it in cold, muted tones that didn't quite belong to the living forest.

Fogpaw felt her paws slow without meaning to.

"...That's it," she murmured.

Flintclaw gave a single nod. "Highstones."

Even from a distance, Fogpaw could feel it—a force ancient and unmoving, something that didn't belong entirely to the present.

Dewpaw's voice lowered, as if speaking too loudly might disturb it. "I wonder what the Moonstone is like... what it's like to share

tongues with StarClan."

Swanflight straightened almost imperceptibly, her gaze lingering on the towering stones, her usual composure touched with something softer.

"...You can feel it," she said, almost to herself.

Fogpaw didn't answer.

Because she could.

There was a presence there, but not in the same way the forest watched. This felt...unfathomable.

After a few heartbeats, she forced herself to keep moving. The others did the same, and slowly, the looming shape of Highstones began to fall behind them.

As they traveled on, the land shifted again.

The trees thickened in places, but not with the wild, tangled growth she knew from ShadowClan territory. These woods felt interrupted, shaped in uneven ways that didn't follow the natural rhythm of the forest. The scents changed too—pungent and sour, layered over the earth and prey-scent in ways that made Fogpaw's nose wrinkle.

She slowed slightly as unfamiliar shapes came into view between the trees—hard-edged structures that rose abruptly from the ground, their surfaces flat and unnatural, their scent clinging heavily to the air.

Twoleg dens.

Fogpaw studied them as they passed, her gaze lingering longer than she meant it to.

"They're everywhere," she murmured.

Dewpaw flicked his tail, already ready to elaborate. "They've expanded over time. Patterns suggest that their territories—"

Dustwhisper's gaze slid toward him.

He stopped mid-thought, clearing his throat. "...Right."

They continued on, the path stretching ahead of them as the river curved alongside their route, its steady current a constant presence at the edge of Fogpaw's senses.

Then—

A sharp snap broke the quiet.

Fogpaw's head whipped around, her ears pricking as every muscle in her body tensed.

Behind them, something had moved near the riverbank, the reeds still swaying faintly.

And just for a heartbeat—

A flicker of orange slipped between the rocks at the river's edge, gone as quickly as it had appeared.

"Did you see that?" Pinesun whispered sharply, already bristling.

"Fox?" Swanflight asked, her posture tightening, her gaze scanning the undergrowth with far more urgency than before.

Flintclaw had already stepped slightly forward, placing himself between the group and the direction of the movement, his shoulders squared.

"I hope not," Dustwhisper murmured, her voice low but steady. "We should keep moving."

Dewpaw's ears flicked, his earlier energy dimmed as his gaze swept the area again. "There's no strong scent," he added. "But the wind could be carrying it away."

Fogpaw didn't speak. Her gaze lingered on the rocks where the movement had been, her chest tightening faintly.

After a moment, the group began moving again, their pace just slightly quicker than before.

Fogpaw followed, though the feeling didn't leave her. It stayed just at the edge of her senses, threading through her thoughts in a way she couldn't quite shake.

They continued forward, the path long and unfamiliar, shifting with every step they took deeper into territory none of them truly knew.

Fogpaw glanced back once more.

The trees stood still and the river moved on as it always had. And yet—the feeling remained.

Something was watching them.

# Chapter 24- Telltale Signs

The days that followed passed in a steady rhythm of movement, rest, and quiet adjustment, each stretch of travel blending into the next as the terrain shifted gradually around them. The river remained their constant guide, winding through the land in a way that felt almost intentional, as though it were leading them forward rather than simply existing beside them. The trees ebbed and flowed, lacking the density of ShadowClan territory, and the scent of Twolegs lingered more frequently now, threading through the undergrowth in sharp, unfamiliar traces.

Fogpaw had begun to adapt, though not without effort. The ground no longer felt entirely unusual beneath her paws, and the wind—while still unpredictable—had become something she could account for rather than fight against. Still, hunting remained inconsistent, and more than once she found herself returning empty-pawed while others, especially Dewpaw, seemed to move through the terrain with a kind of effortless understanding.

It was on the second sunrise after Fogpaw had a strange feeling they were being followed that Dewpaw slowed beside her, his pace falling into step with hers as the others had already settled further ahead along the riverbank to rest.

"How are you holding up?" he asked, his tone light but genuine. "With all of this, I mean."

Fogpaw glanced at him, caught a little off guard by the question. For a heartbeat, she wasn't sure what he meant—whether he was talking about the unfamiliar territory... or her connection to the prophecy.

"...I'm trying," she admitted after a moment, her tail giving a small flick. "It's just—a lot."

Dewpaw nodded once, his expression thoughtful. "It'll take time," he said. "You're doing better than you think."

Fogpaw narrowed her eyes slightly, though there was no real bite behind it. "That's reassuring."

"I mean it," he added quickly, his whiskers twitching faintly. "Most forest cats take longer to figure out how the wind works out here. You're just... overcorrecting."

Fogpaw let out a soft breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

*Thank StarClan.*

He meant the territory.

Not the prophecy.

Fogpaw huffed softly. "I missed another rabbit this morning."

"That's because you're stalking like the ground is going to hide you," Dewpaw replied without hesitation. "Out here, it won't. You have to move with the wind instead of against it."

She glanced at him, skeptical. "And you just... do that?"

"More or less," he said, his tone brightening slightly. "Watch."

He slowed, lowering himself slightly as his attention shifted ahead, his body settling into a controlled, fluid stillness that looked very different from the crouched, shadow-focused approach Fogpaw was used to. His ears angled forward, his head tilting just slightly as if he were listening as much as scenting.

"There," he whispered, barely moving his mouth.

Fogpaw followed his gaze, spotting the rabbit a moment later as it nibbled cautiously at the edge of a patch of grass.

"Don't think about hiding," he murmured. "Think about where your scent is going."

Dewpaw didn't creep toward it the way she would have expected. Instead, he shifted with the breeze, adjusting his angle subtly as the wind changed, keeping himself just out of its direct scent path. His

movements were lighter, less deliberate in appearance, but somehow more precise.

Fogpaw watched, her ears flicking as she tried to follow the pattern.

The rabbit lifted its head briefly, then lowered it again.

Dewpaw lunged.

It was quick, clean, and controlled, his paws barely making a sound as he closed the distance and caught it in a single, efficient pounce with a bite to its throat.

He turned back toward her with the rabbit in his jaws, his expression faintly pleased as he dropped it between them.

"You try next time," he said.

Fogpaw stared at the prey for a moment before glancing back at him. "You make it look so easy!"

"It's not *easy*," Dewpaw replied. "It's just... predictable, once you understand it."

There was a pause as Dewpaw settled down to tear into the rabbit.

Fogpaw lowered herself beside him, still aware of the wind brushing through her fur, though it no longer felt quite as intrusive as it had before. For a few heartbeats, they ate in comfortable silence, the steady rhythm of shared prey grounding in a way the open land still wasn't.

She hesitated, then glanced sideways at him.

"...Do you miss them?" she asked.

Dewpaw looked up, a strip of rabbit still between his teeth, as if the question had taken a second to settle. He finished his bite before answering, his expression shifting into something a little more thoughtful.

"My family?" he clarified, then gave a small nod. "Yeah. I do."

His gaze drifted briefly behind them, though it didn't linger there long.

"Lilacpaw's probably doing fine," he continued, a faint softness entering his voice. "She always does. She doesn't overthink things the way I do. Just... figures things out as she goes."

Fogpaw flicked an ear, listening.

Dewpaw hesitated slightly before adding, "Rabbitpaw..." His whiskers twitched faintly. "He'll manage."

There was something in his tone that made Fogpaw glance at him again.

"...That doesn't sound very convincing," she said.

Dewpaw huffed quietly, not quite a laugh. "He's capable," he said. "Just—" He paused, then shrugged lightly. "He doesn't always think about how what he does affects other cats."

Fogpaw tilted her head slightly, watching him.

"He pushed me into a stream once," Dewpaw went on, his gaze narrowing. "Even though he knows I hate water." His tail flicked once against the ground, though there was more resignation than anger in the movement. "And he's done the same to Lilacpaw before —made her look like a mousebrain in front of a patrol."

He glanced down briefly, as if the memory wasn't entirely distant.

"Not enough to get in real trouble," he added, almost as an afterthought. "But enough."

There wasn't anger in his voice—just a quiet sort of acknowledgment.

"I think he likes getting a reaction," he finished.

Fogpaw made a small sound of understanding, her gaze dropping briefly to the ground between them, her thoughts shifting to Snowpaw.

"...I get that," she admitted.

Dewpaw glanced at her, his ears pricking slightly.

"You miss yours too?" he asked.

Fogpaw nodded, her tail curling loosely around her paws. "Yeah. It's... quieter without them."

Her chest tightened just slightly as familiar shapes rose in her mind —the steady presence of her parents, the way camp had always felt full in a way this open land wasn't.

Dewpaw watched her for a moment, then said, almost casually, "Your littermate is Snowpaw, right?"

Fogpaw blinked, looking back at him. "Yes...?"

"I thought so," he mewed, nodding once.

She narrowed her gaze slightly. "You just...guessed that?"

Dewpaw's whiskers twitched, something almost amused flickering there.

"Not exactly," he admitted. "I remember him from the Gathering. You stood near each other."

"It's almost as if you've memorized every cat," Fogpaw snorted.

"I have," he said simply.

Fogpaw stared at him, baffled.

"*All* of them?"

"Most," he corrected. "At least by name. Gatherings are useful for that, and WindClan makes a point of keeping track. We don't have the size or strength advantage that some of the other Clans do, so knowing who you're dealing with matters."

Fogpaw considered that, her tail flicking once as she took another bite of rabbit.

"That's... a lot to remember."

"It gets easier," Dewpaw shrugged. "You start to see signs. Who stands where. Who talks to who. Who listens."

He paused, then added lightly, "And who misses their family when they're gone."

Fogpaw huffed softly, though there was no real protest behind it.

"...Yeah," she murmured.

For a moment, the conversation settled into something quieter, more comfortable, the tension of the journey easing just enough to make space for something more personal.

Ahead of them, Pinesun glanced back briefly, his gaze flicking between them before returning forward, his expression unreadable.

Fogpaw noticed, though she didn't comment.

...

The group resumed traveling not long after, the river curving sharply as the terrain shifted once more, forcing them into a tighter formation as the ground grew more uneven. The trees pressed closer here, their roots breaking through the earth in tangled patterns, and the scent of damp stone rose faintly from the ground.

Fogpaw's ears flicked.

The feeling returned.

Stronger this time.

She slowed slightly, her gaze sweeping the undergrowth as her muscles tensed instinctively.

"We're still being followed," she murmured.

Flintclaw stopped immediately, his head lifting as he scanned the trees.

"I've been noticing it too," he said.

Swanflight's tail lashed once, her composure tightening. "Then why haven't we done anything about it?"

"Because we haven't seen anything," Dustwhisper replied calmly. "And chasing shadows wastes energy."

A twig snapped.

Not far this time.

Every cat turned.

Fogpaw's gaze locked onto the source—a cluster of rocks along the riverbank where the undergrowth grew thicker.

"Come out," Flintclaw called, his voice firm.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then—

A small shape slipped through the rocks, her paws quick but not quite quiet enough to hide the fact that she had been there all along.

The flash of orange resolved into a fluffy ginger she-cat as she scurried fully into view, her copper eyes wide as they flicked between the gathered patrol.

She froze the moment she realized she had been seen.

"Gingerpaw?!" Swanflight's voice cut sharply through the clearing, disbelief and irritation threading through it at once.

The apprentice flinched slightly, her ears flattening before she straightened again, trying to recover some composure.

"...Hi," she squeaked.

Silence followed, though it didn't last long.

"Why are you here?" Swanflight demanded, stepping forward, her gaze narrowing as it fixed on her. "You weren't sent with us."

Gingerpaw shifted her paws, but she didn't back away. "I know we were only allowed to send one cat," she said quickly, her words tumbling over each other. "But I can be helpful too—"

"You've been following us," Pinesun mewed flatly.

Gingerpaw hesitated for only a heartbeat before nodding. "...Not the whole time," she admitted. "Just... most of it."

Swanflight's expression sharpened. "And you thought that was acceptable?"

"I wasn't going to interfere," the apprentice declared, lifting her chin slightly despite the situation. "I just didn't want to be left behind."

Dewpaw's ears had already perked, his gaze sharpening as he looked at her more closely. "Sandflame and Shellcrest's apprentice," he added, as if confirming something to himself.

Gingerpaw blinked at him. "You know my parents?"

"I know everyone," Dewpaw replied simply, his tail flicking once. "And...I thought I recognized your scent earlier."

"That's... a little strange," she muttered.

Fogpaw almost smiled.

Flintclaw stepped forward then, his large frame demanding attention as he looked down at the apprentice. "You shouldn't have come alone," he mewed, his gaze hard but not unkind.

"I didn't," Gingerpaw replied quickly. "I followed you."

Dustwhisper let out a quiet breath through her nose. "That doesn't make it any better."

Gingerpaw's ears dipped, her confidence faltering just slightly. "I didn't want to stay behind while everyone else got to be part of

something important," she repeated, quieter now. "I can help. I know I can."

The words settled into the space between them.

Fogpaw felt it immediately—the weight of it, the familiarity.

Because she understood.

For a moment, no one spoke, the tension shifting into something more uncertain, more thoughtful.

Seedspring glanced briefly at Swanflight before speaking. "It would be more dangerous to send her back alone than let her stay with us," he said evenly.

Swanflight's tail flicked once, irritation still present, though her gaze lingered on Gingerpaw a moment longer as if reassessing her.

"...She's already here," she exhaled at last, her tone cool, but no longer sharp. "We can't undo that."

No one argued.

Seedspring glanced between the group before giving a small, accepting dip of his head.

Fogpaw met Gingerpaw's gaze, seeing the flicker of hope there beneath the nerves.

"...Then stay with us," she mewed.

Gingerpaw's ears lifted instantly, relief flashing across her expression. "Really?"

Fogpaw gave a small nod. "Really."

And just like that, without ceremony or agreement beyond a few quiet glances—

The group grew.

# Chapter 25- The Hollow Left Behind

ShadowClan felt different without Fogpaw in it.

Snowpaw noticed it most in the quiet moments, when the camp settled between patrols and every cat seemed to know where they were meant to be. The warriors moved with purpose, Mintbreeze sorted herbs in the medicine den alone now that Seedspring was gone, and Nettlepaw still filled the apprentice den with enough chatter to make it feel less empty than it was. But there was a space where Fogpaw should have been, a familiar presence missing from the edge of his vision.

He told himself it didn't bother him.

It wasn't as if she had left forever. She was on a quest. She had Pinesun and Seedspring with her. She would come back with some grand story about SkyClan or StarClan or whatever else waited beyond the gorge, and everyone would gather around to listen.

Snowpaw's claws pressed lightly into the earth.

That was what bothered him most.

Not that she was gone.

That everyone was waiting for her return like it already meant something.

"Snowpaw."

Vineclaw's voice cut through his thoughts.

Snowpaw blinked, realizing he had been staring across the clearing instead of paying attention. His mentor stood near the camp exit, his lean brown frame half-shadowed by the brambles, yellow eyes fixed on him with that sharp, unreadable focus Snowpaw had

grown used to.

"Training," Vineclaw mewed. "Now."

Snowpaw rose to his paws quickly, shaking the stiffness from his legs. "I'm coming."

Nettlepaw looked up from where she had been pawing through the fresh-kill pile, one ear flicking. "Try not to get flattened again."

Snowpaw shot her a look. "Try not to eat all the prey before I get back."

"No promises," she called after him, but there was enough warmth in her voice that he almost smiled.

Almost.

The forest felt damp beneath his paws as he followed Vineclaw out of camp. Newleaf had softened the ground, loosening the last traces of leaf-bare from the roots and shadows. The air carried the faint scent of growing things now, green and sharp beneath the heavier smell of ShadowClan territory. It should have felt refreshing.

Instead, Snowpaw felt restless.

Vineclaw led him to a narrow clearing where the trees bent inward, their branches tangled overhead. It was a place they had trained before, with uneven roots and thick undergrowth that forced every movement to be precise.

"Attack me," Vineclaw ordered.

Snowpaw didn't hesitate.

He launched forward, aiming low, his paws hitting the ground hard as he twisted toward Vineclaw's side. This time, he didn't overthink the movement. He let his body carry him through it, claws sheathed, weight shifting smoothly the way Vineclaw had drilled into him again and again.

Vineclaw dodged, but only barely.

Snowpaw landed, spun, and lunged again. For a heartbeat, he felt good. Fast. Certain. His shoulder brushed Vineclaw's flank before the warrior hooked a paw around his foreleg and sent him rolling into the moss.

Snowpaw hit the ground with a grunt, breath knocked from him.

"Better," Vineclaw said.

Snowpaw pushed himself up, shaking moss from his fur. "Better isn't good enough."

Vineclaw's gaze narrowed slightly. "Who told you that?"

Snowpaw looked away. "No one."

"Then stop acting like you're fighting someone who isn't there."

Snowpaw's tail lashed once before he could stop it. "I'm just trying to improve."

"There is improving," Vineclaw mewed, stepping closer, "and there is clawing at yourself because you think every mistake proves something."

Snowpaw stiffened.

For a moment, the clearing felt too still.

Vineclaw studied him for a long moment, his expression unreadable, then turned his gaze toward the trees. "I know that look."

Snowpaw frowned. "What look?"

"The one that says you think you have to earn your place every time you breathe."

The words hit too close.

Snowpaw said nothing.

Vineclaw's tail flicked once, slower now. "I wasn't born in

ShadowClan."

Snowpaw blinked, caught off guard despite himself. "What?"

"I was a rogue," Vineclaw said plainly. "Before I came here. I lived far from this forest, near the gorge your sister's patrol is traveling toward."

Snowpaw stared at him. Vineclaw had never spoken much about his past. Most cats knew he had not always been Clanborn, but they rarely asked, and he rarely offered.

"You lived near SkyClan?" Snowpaw asked.

"Near where they were said to be," Vineclaw replied. "I did not know them, not truly. But I knew the land. Stone, narrow paths, drops where one wrong step could break more than pride." His gaze shifted back to Snowpaw. "When I came to the forest, Sharpstar was kind enough to let me stay, but every cat looked at me like I had to prove I was not waiting to leave again."

Snowpaw's ears angled forward in anticipation.

"So I tried to prove it," Vineclaw continued. "Every patrol. Every hunt. Every fight. I pushed harder than I needed to, because I thought if I stopped for even a heartbeat, they would see I did not belong."

Snowpaw swallowed, his throat suddenly tight.

"What changed?" he asked.

Vineclaw's mouth curved into a wry smile. "I grew tired."

Snowpaw blinked.

"And then," Vineclaw added, "I learned that loyalty is not proven by tearing yourself apart. It is proven by staying. By choosing your Clan when doubt tells you to stand apart from it."

Snowpaw looked down at his paws.

For a moment, Rapidstar's voice stirred in the back of his mind, too faint to be words.

Vineclaw stepped closer, his voice lowering. "You are skilled, Snowpaw. More skilled than you let yourself believe. But skill will not matter if you let whatever is eating at you hollow you out from the inside."

Snowpaw's ears flattened slightly. "I'm fine."

"No," Vineclaw said. "You are not. But you could be."

Snowpaw's gaze snapped up.

Vineclaw did not soften, but there was no cruelty in his stare. "Train hard. Push yourself. Want more. There is nothing wrong with that. But do not mistake being chosen for being worthy. Fogpaw was chosen for something you may not understand. That does not mean you were left behind because you are less."

Snowpaw's chest tightened sharply.

He hated that Vineclaw had seen it.

He hated more that part of him wanted to believe him.

"I don't care that she went," Snowpaw muttered.

Vineclaw's expression did not change.

Snowpaw looked away first.

The rest of training passed in silence, but the words stayed with him long after they returned to camp. He carried them through the afternoon, through a hunting patrol where he caught a shrew and a small thrush, through Nettlepaw's triumphant announcement that Toadpounce had snapped at Tigerflare for fussing too much over her nest.

"She's going to have those kits soon," Nettlepaw said later as they shared a piece of prey near the apprentice den. "Crystalfall says she's getting rounder every day."

Snowpaw tore off a bite and swallowed. "I noticed."

Nettlepaw gave him a sideways look. "You notice anything that isn't gloomy lately?"

"I'm not gloomy."

"You look like Barkfall when someone steals his favorite moss patch."

Snowpaw snorted. "That's oddly specific."

"It's accurate," Nettlepaw mewed, pleased with herself. Then her expression shifted, softening a little. "You miss her, don't you?"

Snowpaw's jaw tightened.

Nettlepaw didn't say Fogpaw's name, but she didn't need to.

"She'll be back," she added.

"I know."

"Then stop acting like she took half the camp with her."

Snowpaw glanced at her. "It feels like she did."

Nettlepaw blinked, then gave him a softer look than he wanted.

He looked away.

"I didn't mean it like that," he muttered.

"I know," she murmured, and for once she didn't tease him.

That made it worse.

By sundown, Snowpaw was exhausted enough that he thought sleep might come without trouble. He curled into his nest, trying not to think about Vineclaw's words, or Nettlepaw's look, or the emptiness where Fogpaw's breathing should have been.

For a while, the camp was quiet.

Then the darkness changed.

Snowpaw opened his eyes to cold earth beneath his paws.

He was standing at the edge of the Dark Forest again.

This time, he knew it at once.

The trees rose ahead of him, twisted and black, their branches clawing into a sky without stars. The air was thick and stale, heavy with the scent of rot and old rain. Nothing moved, but everything seemed aware of him.

Snowpaw's fur lifted along his spine.

"You came back," a voice said.

Rapidstar stepped from between the trees.

He looked exactly as he had before: broad-shouldered, scarred, eyes burning with a cold brightness that made the shadows around him seem deeper. He moved with the calm confidence of a cat who had never once doubted he belonged wherever he stood.

Snowpaw forced himself not to step back. "I didn't choose to."

Rapidstar's mouth curved faintly. "Are you sure?"

Snowpaw's claws flexed against the cold ground. "What do you want?"

"To help you," Rapidstar replied.

Snowpaw let out a sharp breath. "Cats from the Dark Forest don't help."

"Cats from StarClan always do?" Rapidstar asked smoothly.

Snowpaw froze.

Rapidstar watched him carefully, as if he had been waiting for that exact reaction.

"You're angry because you think anger makes you disloyal," Rapidstar continued. "You are jealous because you think jealousy makes you cruel. But feelings are not betrayal, Snowpaw. They are truth before a cat learns to bury it."

Snowpaw's ears flattened. "You don't know anything about me."

"I know you train until your paws ache and still think it is not enough. I know you watch your sister walk toward destiny while you remain behind, pretending it does not burn. I know you want to matter, but every time you reach for more, some part of you pulls away."

Snowpaw's throat tightened.

Rapidstar stepped closer, his voice lowering. "I can teach you not to pull away."

A shape moved behind him.

Snowpaw's gaze flicked past Rapidstar, his body tensing as something shifted in the shadows. A small she-cat stood there, half-obscured by the twisted trees, her form dimmer than Rapidstar's but clearer than the darkness around her. Her white pelt looked muted in the strange light of the forest, the color dulled as if something had drained it, and her eyes held a distant stillness that made his chest tighten without him understanding why.

Rapidstar didn't turn, but his voice carried easily through the still air.

"Coldpaw," he said, almost casually. "You should be training with the others."

The she-cat hesitated only for a heartbeat before dipping her head slightly. Without another word, she turned and slipped back into the shadows, her form dissolving quickly between the trees until she was gone.

Snowpaw frowned, his tail twitching as his gaze lingered on the place she had disappeared.

The name settled in his mind, pulling up fragments he had heard—the weight in Pinesun's voice when he spoke of the past, the way Seedspring never lingered on certain topics for long, and Oakcloud—Snowpaw remembered the way he went quiet whenever her name came up, like it was too heavy to carry out loud for long.

Realization came slowly.

"...Coldpaw?" he whispered.

His gaze flicked back to Rapidstar, unease settling deeper in his chest. "Why is she here?"

Rapidstar's eyes remained fixed on him. "Some cats end up where they are meant to be," he replied.

"That doesn't answer me."

"No," Rapidstar said. "It gives you a better question."

Before Snowpaw could respond, another cat emerged from the darkness.

This one carried herself like a leader.

Her pelt seemed to ripple with shadow, her eyes bright with something sharp and merciless. Snowpaw knew who she was before Rapidstar said anything. He had heard the stories. Every apprentice had.

Glowstar.

The cat who had banished Splitstar from RiverClan—isolating her, turning her Clan against her, and ultimately sparking the war.

Her name still carried a chill through ShadowClan.

Glowstar's gaze swept over Snowpaw, assessing him with a sharp, calculating intensity, as if he were prey, tool, and apprentice all at once.

"This is him?" she asked.

Rapidstar did not take his eyes off Snowpaw. "This is him."

Snowpaw's stomach twisted, unease tightening in his chest. "I'm not yours."

Glowstar's whiskers twitched, something faintly amused flickering in her expression. "Not yet."

Rapidstar shot her a brief warning glance, and she fell silent, though the glint of amusement did not fully leave her eyes.

Snowpaw took a step back this time, the movement instinctive.

Rapidstar did not follow immediately. Instead, he studied him, his voice lowering as he spoke. "You came here afraid of what you might become, and that fear is useful. It means you understand there is something inside you worth shaping."

Snowpaw's breathing had quickened without him realizing it, his chest rising too fast as the words settled in.

"I can train you," Rapidstar continued, his tone steady, deliberate. "Not in dreams that fade by sunrise, but in strength that follows you back. Speed. Precision. Instinct. The kind of power your Clan will need when the cats they trust are gone."

Snowpaw's breath caught. "Gone?"

Rapidstar's eyes gleamed faintly in the dim light.

"Far away," he corrected softly. "Beyond help."

A chill ran through Snowpaw, sharp and immediate.

Fogpaw.

Seedspring.

Pinesun.

Rapidstar's voice softened then, almost kind in a way that made it worse. "You were left behind, Snowpaw. That does not mean you

have to remain useless."

The word struck deep.

Useless.

Snowpaw hated it.

Hated how easily it found its place inside him.

"I'm not useless," he growled.

"Then prove it."

Glowstar's eyes glinted from the shadows from behind them.

Rapidstar lowered his head slightly, bringing his gaze level with Snowpaw's. "Train with me."

Snowpaw didn't answer right away.

The forest seemed to lean inward, every twisted branch and shifting shadow waiting with him, pressing in on the moment until it felt too heavy to ignore.

He should say no.

He knew he should.

Vineclaw's voice echoed faintly in his mind—*loyalty is proven by staying*—but Rapidstar's presence was closer, sharper, impossible to ignore.

*Train with me.*

Snowpaw swallowed.

"I'll listen," he said at last. "That's all."

Rapidstar smiled.

There was no warmth in it.

Only satisfaction.

"For now," he replied.

Snowpaw woke with his claws buried deep in his nest, the apprentice den dark and quiet around him, but his heart racing as if he had been running for moons.

He lay still for a moment, breath shallow, staring into the darkness as the dream clung stubbornly to his thoughts—Rapidstar, Glowstar, Coldpaw, their presence still faintly in his mind.

Slowly, he pulled his claws free from the moss.

Outside, ShadowClan slept.

Inside his chest, something had begun to shift.

# Chapter 26- Where the River Finds Us

They had not meant to leave the river.

The change had come gradually at first, the water narrowing and slowing until the banks grew uneven and choked with fallen branches and thick, tangled undergrowth. What had once been a clear path forward became something difficult to follow, forcing the patrol to angle away from it, step by careful step, until the steady sound of running water faded behind them.

The scent changed with it.

Twolegplace.

Fogpaw noticed it before she said anything, her nose wrinkling slightly as the sharp, unnatural smell threaded through the air in a way that didn't belong to any part of the forest she knew.

"You smell that too, right?" Gingerpaw's voice piped up from just behind them, bright despite the unfamiliar territory. She quickened her pace until she was nearly shoulder to shoulder with Dewpaw, her eyes flicking around with restless curiosity. "It's like—sharp? But also kind of sour? Is that what Twolegs always smell like? Or is it just this place?"

Dewpaw's ears flicked, though he didn't slow. "The scent varies depending on the density of Twolegplaces and—"

"Do they *all* live this close together?" Gingerpaw continued, barely pausing for breath. "Because I've only ever seen them from a distance and—"

"No, they live together based on available terrain and—" Dewpaw started again, his tone tightening just slightly.

"And the Thunderpaths," she added quickly, her eyes widening. "Those are theirs too, right? Do they use them all the time? How do they not trip over each other?"

"They don't trip *because*—" Dewpaw cut in, a little more sharply this time.

"I heard they keep prey," Gingerpaw went on, undeterred. "Like, just... out in the open. Is that true? That sounds fish-brained. Why would they do that?"

"They keep them for resources, not for hunting, and if you would just—"

"I mean, we could take one, right? Hypothetically?" she added, her voice dropping slightly as if she had just thought of something brilliant. "Like, if they're just there—"

"No," Dewpaw said flatly, finally turning his head toward her. "Not hypothetically. Not practically. Not at all."

Gingerpaw blinked at him, then tilted her head slightly. "...You talk fast."

Dewpaw stared at her for a beat. "So do you."

Fogpaw let out a soft snort of laughter, the tension easing just slightly as the two of them fell into a brief, surprised silence.

Ahead of them, Seedspring slowed, his ears angling forward as the trees began to thin, the forest giving way to open stretches of rough ground and scattered brush.

"This must be what Vineclaw meant," he mewed quietly.

Fogpaw stopped without meaning to.

It cut across the land in a wide, unnatural stretch of dark stone, far broader than the narrow path that edged ShadowClan territory. Back home, the Thunderpath felt more like a boundary than a threat—something to be avoided, yes, but quiet most of the time, with monsters that passed only occasionally.

This was nothing like that.

The stone stretched endlessly in both directions, its surface flat and smooth in a way that made her fur prickle, as if no paw had ever truly belonged there. The scent of it was overwhelming—hot, acrid, layered with something sharp that stung her nose—and it didn't fade or soften the way it did back home.

And the monsters—

They didn't come and go.

They *raced.*

Even as she watched, something roared past in the distance, its speed startling, its movement too fast to track for more than a heartbeat before it vanished again. The air seemed to pulse with it, the ground faintly trembling beneath her paws as if the Thunderpath itself never fully settled.

Dewpaw's ears flicked as he stepped forward, his usual confidence dimming as he studied it. "There are usually multiple paths like this near Twoleg territory," he said, his voice quieter than usual. "If Vineclaw was right..."

"There will be more," Dustwhisper finished calmly.

Flintclaw moved to the front, his broad frame steady as he scanned both directions along the Thunderpath. "We cross quickly," he said. "No hesitation. No stopping."

Swanflight's tail curled tightly around her paws, though she said nothing, her gaze fixed on the dark stretch ahead.

Fogpaw's claws pressed lightly into the ground as the low rumble beneath the stone grew louder.

Flintclaw's head snapped slightly to one side. "Wait."

They froze.

A monster burst into view moments later, its massive shape tearing

across the Thunderpath with a deafening roar. The ground trembled beneath it, wind whipping sharply through their fur as it passed, carrying that same choking scent with it.

Fogpaw flinched despite herself.

Then it was gone.

Flintclaw turned back. "Now!"

He crossed first, his strides long and certain as he cleared the Thunderpath in only a few bounds.

Dustwhisper followed immediately after, her movements precise and controlled, Dewpaw quick at her side.

Swanflight went next, her composure holding, though her steps were sharper than before as she moved across.

Seedspring followed, his gaze flicking once down the path before he crossed with quiet urgency.

Pinesun brushed past Fogpaw then, his flank briefly pressing against hers. "Stay close," he murmured.

She nodded, forcing her paws to move.

They crossed together, the stone beneath her paws feeling wrong—too smooth, too open—and for a moment the stretch felt endless, her senses stretched too thin in the exposed space.

Then they were across.

Fogpaw exhaled, only realizing she had been holding her breath once her paws hit solid earth again.

Behind them—

A sharp, strangled sound.

Fogpaw turned.

Gingerpaw stood frozen halfway across the Thunderpath, her paws

rooted where she stood, her wide eyes locked on the stone as another distant roar began to build.

"Gingerpaw—move!" Swanflight called sharply from the other side.

But she didn't.

She couldn't.

The sound grew louder.

Flintclaw moved without hesitation.

He spun and launched back onto the Thunderpath, his paws striking hard against the stone as the monster's roar surged toward them. "Go!" he snapped, reaching her in a few powerful strides.

Gingerpaw flinched as he grabbed her by the scruff, hauling her forward. Her paws stumbled, catching as he dragged her across the remaining distance just as the monster thundered past behind them.

The wind tore through their fur, the sound deafening.

Then it was gone.

Flintclaw released her only once they reached the other side, his chest rising heavily though his expression remained controlled.

Gingerpaw staggered, her legs trembling. "I—I didn't—"

"You're fine," Dustwhisper said firmly, stepping forward before panic could take hold. "You're alive. That's all we care about."

Swanflight exhaled slowly, though her tail still flicked with tension. "Do not hesitate like that again."

Gingerpaw nodded quickly, her ears still pinned, her breathing uneven.

Fogpaw stepped a little closer, the tightness in her chest not fully settled. "Are you okay?" she asked, her voice quieter than the others, but steady.

Gingerpaw swallowed, giving a small, shaky nod. "Yeah. I just—I froze."

"That happens," Fogpaw said, glancing briefly toward the Thunderpath before looking back at her. "You moved when it mattered."

Gingerpaw's shoulders eased, if only slightly.

For a moment, no one moved.

Then Flintclaw turned back toward the path, his expression tightening slightly. "We don't cross the next one like that," he said.

Dustwhisper gave a small nod. "Pairs so no one crosses alone," she mewed, touching her tail lightly to Dewpaw's shoulder. "You're with me."

Swanflight's gaze flicked briefly to Gingerpaw before she spoke. "She comes with me."

Flintclaw glanced toward Seedspring. "You and me?"

Seedspring dipped his head once in agreement.

Pinesun shifted slightly closer to Fogpaw. "Then we stay together," he said quietly.

Fogpaw nodded, the tension still lingering in her chest.

"Wait for the gap," Flintclaw continued. "Move when I say. Stay together no matter what."

The second Thunderpath came into view soon after, narrower than the first, but no less dangerous. The scent of monsters clung heavily to the air, and even in the quiet moments, the ground seemed to hum faintly beneath their paws.

Flintclaw stepped forward, scanning the path before raising his tail slightly.

"Now," he said.

He and Seedspring crossed first, their pace controlled and steady as they moved as one across the stone.

Dustwhisper followed with Dewpaw close beside her, guiding his pace with subtle shifts of her movement.

Swanflight moved next, Gingerpaw pressed close at her side this time, her steps quick but determined, no hesitation in them now.

Pinesun and Fogpaw went last.

She stayed close to his side, matching his stride as they crossed, forcing her focus forward instead of letting it drift toward the distant rumble that threatened to rise again.

They reached the other side without incident and only then did Fogpaw feel her shoulders loosen slightly.

The third Thunderpath stretched wider than the others, darker, the scent stronger, the presence of monsters more constant.

But this time, they were ready.

They crossed the same way—pairs moving in sequence, each cat watching the others, adjusting without needing to be told.

Then it was their turn.

Pinesun glanced briefly down the Thunderpath, his ears flicking as he listened for any sign of movement. "Ready?" he murmured.

Fogpaw nodded, though her chest still felt tight.

They stepped onto the stone together, their pace even and controlled. For a few heartbeats, there was nothing—only the steady rhythm of their paws against the smooth surface and the lingering scent of monsters in the air.

Then—

A roar split the silence.

Fogpaw's head snapped to the side.

The monster burst into view, racing down the Thunderpath faster than anything she had seen before, its speed impossible to judge, its path cutting directly toward them.

Her paws faltered, and Pinesun reacted instantly.

"Move!"

He shoved into her side with enough force to knock her off balance, sending both of them tumbling forward across the remaining stretch of stone just as the monster tore past behind them. The rush of wind caught at their fur, the sound deafening as it passed so close that Fogpaw felt the air snap at her tail.

Then they were off the Thunderpath.

They hit the grass hard, momentum carrying them a short distance before they rolled to a stop.

For a moment, Fogpaw didn't move.

Then she realized—

Pinesun was on top of her.

Their breaths were uneven, too fast, their bodies still pressed close from the fall. For a heartbeat, neither of them spoke, their eyes meeting in startled silence.

Fogpaw felt heat rush faintly beneath her fur.

Pinesun blinked, as if only just realizing how close they were, and pushed himself up quickly, stepping back.

"...You okay?" he asked, his voice a little rougher than before.

Fogpaw forced herself upright, shaking out her fur in an attempt to steady herself. "Yeah," she mumbled, though her pulse hadn't quite settled. "You?"

He gave a short nod. "Fine."

Behind them, Dewpaw let out a low whistle. "That was... closer than ideal."

Dustwhisper flicked her tail lightly against his side, though there was the faintest hint of relief in her expression.

Seedspring was already moving before anyone else could say more, his gaze sharp as he stepped in front of Fogpaw and Pinesun, quickly assessing them both. "Hold still," he murmured, his voice calm but firm.

He checked Fogpaw first, brushing lightly along her side and tail, his nose close to her fur as he searched for any sign of injury. "Any pain?" he asked.

Fogpaw shook her head, still catching her breath. "No—I'm okay."

He lingered for only a moment longer before shifting to Pinesun, repeating the same careful inspection, his movements efficient and practiced.

Pinesun gave a small shake of his head. "I'm fine," he repeated.

Seedspring studied him a heartbeat longer, then gave a small, approving nod. "No injuries," he confirmed, more to the group than to them.

Only then did Swanflight exhale slowly, her gaze sharp as it moved between them. "Next time," she said coolly, "we do not linger."

Gingerpaw nodded quickly beside her.

Flintclaw studied them both for a moment longer, then gave a single, firm nod. "You made it."

Fogpaw didn't fully believe it until the scent of monsters began to fade behind them.

...

They traveled until sundown before stopping.

By the time the sky was coated orange, the forest had shifted once more, the heavy Twoleg scent gradually thinning as the land softened around them. The ground gave way beneath their paws again, no longer hard and unyielding but layered with moss and damp earth, and the trees grew thicker, their roots stretching deeper into the soil.

And then—

The sound returned.

Faint at first, just beneath the quiet of the forest, but steady.

Water.

Relief settled quietly in Fogpaw's chest as the familiar rush of the river reached her, the sound weaving through the trees until it became unmistakable. They had found it again.

It wasn't quite home.

But it was close enough to feel like it.

They ate quietly that night, the exhaustion from the day settling into their limbs. Even Dewpaw spoke less than usual, and Gingerpaw stayed close to Swanflight, her earlier fear not fully gone.

Fogpaw finished her share of prey and stepped away from the group, her paws carrying her instinctively toward the edge of the river.

Pinesun sat a short distance away, his gaze lifted toward the sky.

The stars were clearer here.

Brighter.

Fogpaw hesitated for only a moment before approaching, settling beside him without a word. For a while, she simply followed his

gaze upward, letting the quiet settle between them.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked after a moment.

Pinesun didn't answer right away.

When he did, his voice was quieter than she expected.

"Coldpaw," he murmured. Then, after a pause, "And Blackrose."

Fogpaw's ears flicked slightly.

"The Thunderpaths today..." he continued, his gaze still fixed on the stars. "It reminded me how quickly things can change. One moment you're there, and the next..."

He didn't finish.

He didn't need to.

Fogpaw shifted slightly, her tail curling around her paws.

"They're still there," she said quietly. "In StarClan."

Pinesun's expression didn't change much, but something in his gaze softened. "I know," he replied. "I just wonder sometimes... if they're watching the way we think they are."

Fogpaw tilted her head slightly. "What do you mean?"

He exhaled slowly. "We talk about them like they're always there. Like they see everything. Guide everything." His gaze flicked briefly toward her. "But what if they don't?"

Fogpaw considered that, her eyes returning to the stars.

"I think they do," she murmured after a moment. "Maybe not in the way we expect. But... I think they're there when it matters... I think StarClan was with us today."

They fell quiet after that, the stars stretching endlessly above them, steady and distant.

Beside her, Pinesun didn't move at first.

Then, after a moment, his tail shifted slightly, brushing lightly against hers where it rested against the ground.

The touch was faint—barely there—but not accidental.

Fogpaw stilled for a heartbeat, her gaze still lifted toward the stars, though she was suddenly more aware of him beside her than anything above them.

He didn't look at her.

But he didn't pull away.

And somehow—

That was enough.

# Chapter 27- Meetings Upon Meetings

The first few nights had felt hauntingly real.

Or at least, that was what Snowpaw had told himself when he woke each morning with the memory of dark trees and colder air clinging to him longer than it should have. The forest had not faded the way dreams were supposed to. It lingered—sharp in his mind, heavy in his limbs, as if he had truly walked beneath those twisted branches instead of sleeping through the night.

Rapidstar had spoken more than he had acted at first.

He had circled Snowpaw in that quiet, watchful way, his voice low and steady as he spoke of strength, of instinct, of what it meant to become something more than what the Clans expected. Snowpaw had listened, wary at first, keeping his distance, telling himself he was only there to understand.

Only to listen.

But listening had not stayed that simple. It had shifted, slowly, into something else.

Training.

At first it had been small things—corrections to his stance, adjustments to his footing, the way he carried his weight when he moved. Rapidstar's instructions had been precise, almost effortless, as if he could see every weakness before Snowpaw even realized it was there.

Then it had grown faster.

Snowpaw had learned how to strike without hesitation, how to move with purpose instead of thought, how to let instinct take over

in ways that felt almost unnatural—and yet, somehow, right.

He had gotten better.

He knew he had.

Even Vineclaw had noticed.

But the improvement came with something else.

Each morning, Snowpaw woke heavier than the last, his muscles aching in a way that didn't match the stillness of sleep. The exhaustion clung to him, dull and persistent, like something was being taken from him piece by piece without leaving a mark.

And through it all—

Coldpaw had not returned.

Snowpaw had looked for her the first few nights, his gaze drifting beyond Rapidstar, searching the shadows for that pale shape that had lingered just out of reach.

But she was gone.

And Rapidstar never mentioned her.

...

The river was quiet when Snowpaw arrived.

He reached the edge of the reeds first, his paws slowing as he stepped into the space where they had met before. The night had settled fully around him now, the stars faint through the branches above, the forest still in that in-between state where nothing moved unless it needed to.

Snowpaw waited.

At first, he didn't think much of it. Freezingpaw wasn't always early, but as the moments stretched, an uneasiness settled in his chest.

His ears flicked, catching every small sound—the shift of leaves, the

distant call of something moving through the undergrowth—but none of it was him.

Snowpaw shifted his weight slightly, his tail thumping once against the ground.

*Maybe he isn't coming.*

The thought came sharper than he expected.

He should leave.

He knew he should.

Every extra heartbeat there was a risk—RiverClan knew of their meetings, but ShadowClan did not.

The imbalance sat wrong with him, even if he hadn't said it out loud.

Snowpaw turned slightly, ready to step back into the trees—

"Snowpaw."

He froze.

Freezingpaw emerged from the shadows a moment later, his white pelt catching what little light filtered through the reeds. He looked different tonight—tense in a way Snowpaw hadn't seen before, his movements sharper, less sure.

"I've been waiting," Snowpaw mewed, impatience threading through his voice.

Freezingpaw let out a quiet breath, shaking his head once. "I know. I just—" He hesitated, his gaze dropping briefly to the ground before lifting again. "We haven't seen Gingerpaw."

Snowpaw's ears twitched.

"What do you mean?"

"She's gone," Freezingpaw said, his voice tightening. "She hasn't

been in camp. No one knows where she went, and they're starting to get worried."

He paused, then added more quietly, "We were supposed to become warriors next week."

Snowpaw stilled.

Freezingpaw's claws pressed lightly into the ground as he went on. "Our final assessment already happened. Dawnstar said we were ready—both of us." His voice wavered slightly despite himself. "It was supposed to be together."

Snowpaw's chest tightened.

"I don't know what happens if she doesn't show up," Freezingpaw continued. "If they delay it... or if they just go ahead without her. She wouldn't miss something like that. Not unless—"

He cut himself off.

Snowpaw stepped a little closer, his voice lowering. "She'll be fine," he murmured, more certain than he felt. "She's not the kind of cat who just disappears without a reason."

Freezingpaw huffed a quiet breath. "That's what I'm worried about."

Snowpaw shifted slightly, steadying himself before continuing. "If she left, it's because she chose to. And if she chose to, she knows what she's doing."

That wasn't entirely true.

But it sounded right.

And Freezingpaw needed that more than the truth.

Freezingpaw studied him for a moment, something searching in his expression before his shoulders eased, if only slightly. "Yeah," he murmured. "Maybe."

The tension between them shifted, softening just enough to breathe

again.

For a moment, the distance between them felt smaller than it had before—not just in space, but in something unspoken that had been building beneath their meetings without either of them naming it.

"I'm glad you stayed," Freezingpaw mewed, shifting his paws.

Snowpaw's chest tightened at that, his heart skipping a beat before he could stop himself. "I didn't want to miss seeing you."

The words left his mouth too easily.

He faltered, ears flattening as he caught himself. "I—I mean because our meetings are important," he added quickly, his voice stronger the second time. "For the Clans."

Freezingpaw held his gaze for just a heartbeat before glancing sideways, though Snowpaw was pleased to see the corner of his mouth curve upward.

"Oh yeah?" Freezingpaw drawled after a moment, a faint note of amusement slipping into his voice. "Important for the Clans, is it?"

Snowpaw felt heat rise beneath his fur. "That's what I said."

Freezingpaw's whiskers twitched, his gaze sliding back. "Didn't sound like that at first."

"You're hearing things," Snowpaw huffed, giving him a light shove with his shoulder.

Freezingpaw staggered back half a step, more exaggerated than necessary, before bumping into him in return. "Am I?"

For a moment, the tension eased completely as they circled each other in a brief, playful exchange—paws brushing, movements quick but careless in a way that didn't belong to patrols or borders or anything they were supposed to be worrying about.

Snowpaw ducked under a swipe, nudging Freezingpaw off balance before stepping back, a quiet breath of laughter escaping him before

he could stop it.

Freezingpaw steadied himself, the amusement lingering in his expression for only a heartbeat longer before it softened into something more serious.

"You should be careful," Freezingpaw said quietly. "If your Clan finds out—"

"They won't," Snowpaw cut in, though his voice was lower now, less certain than before. "Not if I'm gone for too long."

Freezingpaw's ears flicked. "That's what I mean. You're already risking more than I am."

Snowpaw hesitated, his claws pressing lightly into the ground as he considered it.

Then—

"We could meet closer to the ShadowClan border," he said, his voice steadying as the idea settled into place. "If I don't have to come this far, I won't be gone as long. Less chance of anyone noticing."

Freezingpaw studied him for a moment, something unreadable passing through his expression. "That's... closer to your camp," he mewed slowly.

Snowpaw gave a small shrug. "Exactly."

A brief pause lingered between them.

Then Freezingpaw nodded. "Alright," he said. "We'll try it."

Something about the agreement settled differently than Snowpaw expected.

More deliberate.

More dangerous.

But he didn't take it back.

For a heartbeat, neither of them moved. Then Freezingpaw's tail brushed lightly against Snowpaw's, the contact brief but unmistakable.

Snowpaw stilled, his breath catching for just a second.

Freezingpaw didn't pull away.

And neither did he.

...

By the time Snowpaw slipped back into camp, the forest had gone quiet again.

He moved carefully through the shadows, his paws light as he made his way back toward the apprentice den, his thoughts still caught somewhere between what had just happened and what it meant.

He lay down slowly, the moss cool beneath him.

For a moment, he thought maybe sleep wouldn't come.

Then it did.

The Dark Forest was waiting.

Rapidstar stood where he always did, his form already turned toward Snowpaw as if he had been expecting him.

"You're late," he growled.

Snowpaw didn't hesitate. "I had to meet someone."

Rapidstar's gaze sharpened slightly, something unreadable passing through his expression before it smoothed again.

"...I see."

The forest seemed to shift around them, the air tightening in a way Snowpaw was beginning to recognize.

Rapidstar stepped closer.

"Then we won't waste any more time."

Snowpaw didn't move back.

And this time—

He didn't question it.